

WEST ASIA: ONGOING CONFLICTS AND INDIA

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The Persian Gulf region has been, and will remain the epicentre of global security dynamics in the foreseeable future, due to various reasons. It is the heart of West Asia, which has been a strategic sub-system of the world for more than two centuries, stretching from the Eastern Mediterranean to Afghanistan; its significance in the global power politics evolves from the complexities of its geo-political, geo-economic and geo-strategic importance as a strategic choke-point on some of the most important trade routes, besides being home to some of the world's richest oil and gas reserves.

The definition of what constitutes 'West Asia', or the 'Middle East' (as the British and Western countries call the larger area) has varied historically, and been much debated — at one time, it was seen to comprise everything from the Crimean Sea to the eastern borders of colonial India. It was only after World War II, the partition of the subcontinent and the serious exploitation of the region's oil assets that the 'Persian Gulf region' started being treated as a separate entity. For the purposes of this paper, I have restricted myself to the countries touching the Persian Gulf and their immediate neighbours — in what is now commonly known as 'West Asia'. Occasional references to Egypt have been made necessary

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by the role played by Egypt in West Asian affairs. The virtues or otherwise of calling this region 'West Asia' are less important than the idea that it comprises one strategically coherent region. It is the *themes and issues* that link the nation-states of this region — energy security, terrorism, the rise of new power equations, proliferation, Islam, democratisation (or the lack of it), the role of the United States and certain other powers, etc — that make the Persian Gulf region and the larger 'West Asia' an important part of India's landscape for the foreseeable future.

The seeds of conflict in the West Asian region were sown long before most of the nations in the region became independent (or post-World War II, assumed independence) and took on the names and forms by which we know them today. The growing global dependence on Gulf energy, South Asian transit routes for that energy, terrorism, proliferation, political uncertainty, rise of local non-state militia, etc. make it likely that this region will remain a significant part of the overall strategic picture for any country that has regional or global aspirations. Social unrest, water-related problems, fundamentalism, instability and conflicts render the region on the short fuse, leading to a potentially dangerous threat to regional and international stability. The rise of local militant groups, some of them funded and assisted by rival nations, has only added to the problem. There are good reasons why the strategic significance of the Gulf region will outlive specific US and coalition force commitments that we see today. India's vital interests are, thus, inextricably linked to stability, peace and security in the Gulf region.

TREND LINES OF CONFLICT

There are several trend lines of conflict in the region running simultaneously that have the potential to converge and precipitate a situation that we need to be prepared for — politically, diplomatically, and if need be, militarily (to be discussed separately). These trend lines could be grouped as:

- External Conflict:
 - Oil and gas — energy security issues.
 - Intervention by the US and other powers.
 - Nuclear energy vs. nuclear arms proliferation.
 - Economic issues.
 - The US and allies vs. increasing Chinese influence and Russian interests, especially in adjacent Central Asia.
- Internal Conflict:
 - Power struggles within the nation-states — ‘intra-state’.
 - Monarchy vs. religious leaders (Saudi Arabia).
 - Rulers vs. the people (Iran).
 - Sheikhly families vs. the urban educated youth (UAE, Kuwait).
 - Sunni vs. Shia (Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia).
 - The Kurdish claims for an independent state in Northern Iraq.
 - Reformism vs. religious extremism (Iran, Saudi Arabia).
 - Power struggles between nation-states — ‘inter-state’.
 - Arab vs. Jew (Israel vs. Syria+Iran+Saudi Arabia.....).
 - Sunni Arab vs. Shia (predominantly from Iran/Iraq).
 - Various unresolved boundary disputes.
 - Water and food security (entire Levant, Iraq, Turkey, Saudi Arabia).
 - Issues pertaining to sharing of water resources, ownership of oil-wells, etc. (Syria, Iraq, Turkey).
 - Support to non-state actors by other regional states (Iran-Hezbollah, Saudi Arabia-Hamas, Iran-Hamas).
 - Large number of refugees/internally displaced persons (Arabs, Jews, Palestinians, Afghans).
 - The rise of non-state actors:
 - Palestinian/Lebanese groups — Hamas, Hezbollah.
 - Al Qaeda, Taliban, Muslim Brotherhood, Mahdi Army, etc.

Some of these issues are discussed in the subsequent paragraphs. While it would be proper to discuss each issue separately, the manner in which

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some of them are intertwined makes it imperative that the overall interaction between different forces takes precedence over individual treatment.

A Region of Power Struggle

Within a century since 1900 AD, three different powers changed hands in West Asia. The large Turkish Ottoman Empire was replaced after World War I by the British Empire. The British broke up the monolithic structure into a number of monarchical states and dominated the region till World War II. After World War II, Britain gradually retreated from the region — largely due to a resource crunch, while America emerged as the new superpower and took over strategic, political and economic control of West Asia. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union as the other superpower contested the American dominance, resulting in the emergence of military governments with socialistic overtones and ideologies in major states like Egypt, Iraq and Syria.

West Asia is predominantly Arab and Sunni Muslim — with the exception of Turkey (Islamic but secular), Iraq (mix of Shia, Sunni and Kurds) and Iran (Islamic Shias). Smaller Kurdish settlements also exist in Syria and Iran, besides Eastern Turkey. As a region, West Asia has generated more conflicts in the 20th century, and even today, than any other region of the world. The emergence of Israel as an independent nation in 1948 was never accepted by the Arab and Muslim world that still views it as an Anglo-American imposition. Anti-Americanism has, therefore, been a consistent feature of West Asia ever since. Only certain monarchical regimes allied politically with the United States, to ensure their personal political survival.¹

The Arab-Israel Conflict on Palestine

The several Arab-Israel conflicts from 1948 till 1973 have been well recorded and studied by most of us in the uniformed community. Equally important is the

1. Dr Subhash Kapila, "West Asia's Changing Strategic Dynamics," South Asia Analysis Group.

evolution of the Arab psyche from the days of Pan-Arabism (post World War I) through Arab nationalism, Arabism, Arab union/unity, Arab state patriotism, etc. till the final acceptance of a national identity without the shackles of an 'Arab' tag. This has come about primarily due to economic considerations — and the several nation-states realise that their younger generations, born after the age of 'Pan-Arabism' have no great belief in such alignments.

Pan-Arabism...for long was a sacrosanct ideological principle in all the Arab countries, some of which even incorporated it in their Constitutions. But as the various Arab states established themselves more firmly and defined and pursued their various national interests with growing clarity, their commitment to pan-Arabism became more and more perfunctory. At the present time, after a series of bitter inter-Arab conflicts, even the customary lip-service is often lacking.²

Water and Food Security

In recent times, the water issue has been a great concern of the Israelis, Palestinians, and Arab nations in the region. Mikhail Gorbachev (former Premier of the Soviet Union) and Shimon Peres (former Prime Minister of Israel) noted years ago,

More than anywhere else, the Middle East exemplifies the perils and possibilities created by the water crisis...the various states in the Middle East have spent billions to acquire arms instead of building water pipelines or finding ways to conserve, clean and use water more efficiently on a shared, regional basis...We all know that deserts create poverty, and that poverty often leads to war — especially when everyone is armed to the teeth. But missiles in an armed desert can't carry water — any more than minefields can stop pollution from crossing borders.³

2. Bernard Lewis, *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East* (Berlin: Schocken, 2001), p. 140.

3. R. Jerry Adams, Ph.D, "Middle East Conflict", available at <http://www.awesomelibrary.org/MiddleEastConflict-part2.html>, as accessed on June 30, 2010. Dr. Adams is Owner & Head of Evaluation and Development Institute, Denver and has spent 12 years as an Environmental Strategist, compiling environmental research and its impact through his work with his website www.AwesomeLibrary.org. Awesome Library is rated #11 (out of about 60 million Web sites) for "current events" on Google.

The Iraqi challenge to the West Asian status quo was posing a serious threat to US' overriding strategic concern in West Asia, i.e. the security of Israel.

In the contemporary era, river waters remain a potential source of friction in the region. The Jordan river lies on the borders of Israel, the Kingdom of Jordan and the areas administered by the Palestinian Authority. Turkey and Syria each control about a quarter of the river Euphrates, on whose lower reaches Iraq is heavily dependent. Water is one of the likely causes of future conflicts in the region.

US ROLE SINCE 2003

Why did the US spend billions of dollars to engage Iraq in 1991? It was under a UN mandate to 'liberate Kuwait' from Iraqi occupation, after Saddam Hussein forcefully staked the historical Iraqi claim over Kuwait (which had been carved out of Iraq by Britain as a 'protectorate' through an 1899 agreement with Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah, whose family, led by Emir Abdullah Al Salem Al Sabah, was itself installed by Britain as the 'caretaker' in the oil-rich region, way back in 1880; Britain regularised the status of Kuwait by subsequently granting it 'independence' in 1961, when then Iraqi Premier Hassan Abdul Kassem raised the issue, with reference to the Lausanne Conference⁴ of 1923).

Why did the US again spend billions of dollars to engage Iraq in 2003? Because Iraq — as a relatively modernised and secular Arab Islamic state

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4. The real reason for the 1923 Lausanne Conference (held under the League of Nations) was the discovery of the Mosul oilfields in Kurdish Northern Iraq. Turkey suddenly decided it had a claim to the vast oilfield that lay beneath the land occupied by the Kurds. By now, America was also interested. The American observer (sent at the insistence of US oil major John D. Rockefeller) went along with the existing illegal situation in Kuwait. Rockefeller had no intentions of rocking the British boat just as long as he could get his share of the new oil find. Iraq lost its rights under the old Turkish Petroleum Company agreement, and the status of Kuwait remained unchanged. The question of Mosul oil was left deliberately vague at the insistence of the British delegate, who stated that these questions would be settled "by future negotiations". On June 25, 1961, Iraqi Premier Abdul Kareem Kassem raised the issue, pointing out that the promised "negotiations" had not yet taken place. Instead, Britain granted independence to Kuwait, ignoring the fact that the land was not theirs to give, but was a historical part of Iraq that had been hived off by Britain for exploitation of its oil. Kuwait continued under the Al-Sabah family, which ruled with an iron hand, with British military protection. Abdul Kareem Kassem was assassinated in a 1963 coup, allegedly by a collusion of the CIA, Britain and the Ba'ath Party activists.

with its vast oil revenues — was building up a military capability to challenge the existing status quo in West Asia, primarily directed at US dominance and the Gulf Sheikhdoms which provided the pillar for the American dominance. More importantly, this Iraqi challenge to the West Asian status quo was posing a serious threat to the US' overriding strategic concern in West Asia, i.e. the security of Israel. It was also to regain the US foothold in the region — by dislodging Saddam Hussein, installing a sympathetic regime, and as a prelude to establishing itself as a military force in the region, and exercising coercive diplomacy over Iran by encircling it from both sides, i.e. Iraq and Afghanistan.

The US labelled the Gulf War 2003 as one of “liberation”, because the Saddam Hussein regime had been overthrown. Prior to this, the US had staged a year-long propaganda show — to convince American taxpayers and the world at large, that the world's only superpower had no choice but to attack a sovereign and crippled country — that had *not attacked* the United States, that had *not threatened to attack* the United States, and one that knew it would mean instant mass suicide for it if it attacked the United States. The US thesis was odd, *not simply because Iraq was not a threat* — as the war's easy military victory demonstrated — but because *the US knew that Iraq was not a threat, at all*. They'd been telling the world one story after another about why Iraq was a threat, an imminent threat, a threat increasing in danger with each passing day, a nuclear threat, a chemical threat, a biological threat, that Iraq was a terrorist state, that Iraq was tied to Al Qaeda...only to have each story amount to nothing. What they did not mention *officially* was that *this was a great opportunity to amass troops in Saudi Arabia and enforce an era of coercive diplomacy* in the region — an attempt to regain lost ground post the Iranian Islamic Revolution. They insisted repeatedly that Iraq must agree to have the UN weapons inspectors back in, and when Iraq agreed to this, the US declared that it wasn't good enough — and proceeded to disparage the effort.

Due to the unilateral decision by the US to go to war against Iraq in 2003 to effect a 'regime change', the UN was relegated to irrelevance on the most important question that it can face — being an institution which

declared in the very first sentence of its Charter, the determination “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind.”

Whatever the excuse, or whatever the means of dividing Iraq, it is very likely part of the Anglo-American strategy for Iraq to Balkanise the country. Insisting that what is being proposed is not Balkanisation, but *federalism*, is a moot point. This is because reverting to a more federal system where provinces have greater autonomy would naturally separate the country along ethno-religious boundaries. The Kurds would be in the north with the Kirkuk oilfields; the Sunnis in the centre and west, with nothing much in terms of resources; and the Shias in the south, with most of the oil. The disproportionate provincial resources would create animosity between provinces, and the long-manipulated ethnic differences would spill from the streets into the political sphere. As tensions grew — as they undoubtedly would — between the provinces, there would be a natural slide to eventual separation. Disagreements over power sharing in the federal government would lead to its eventual collapse, and the strategy of Balkanisation would have been achieved with the appearance of no outside involvement.

We now have a situation where there are large concentrations of US troops in Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Afghanistan, and in Central Asia. It also needs to be noted that in both the Gulf War and Iraq War, Israel was prevailed upon by the United States to keep out of the wars so as not to enlarge the scope of military operations. In terms of strategic dynamics, it is significant that United States military offensives (in 1991 and 2003) took place in West Asia when the erstwhile Soviet Union as a countervailing power had disintegrated by 1991, and in 2003, Russia as the successor state was not yet resurgent to challenge the United States head-on. In other words, the United States did not face any serious military challenge in both wars. The United States’ military offensive in both the Gulf War and Iraq War took place in what can best be called a ‘strategic vacuum’ against an overwhelming asymmetric opponent, i.e. Iraq.

The Aftermath of the Gulf War

In the aftermath of the Gulf War, West Asian political stability and peace stood further undermined. West Asia did not produce any new democratic states or changes for the better in terms of human rights. US supported monarchies continued to rule autocratically. Islamic *jihadi* terrorism appeared as a menacing and potent force against American policies and the presence of US troops and bases in the region. Israel stood continuously endangered, not by Iraq, but by Islamic *jihadi* suicide bombers for whose martyrdom the most loyal American ally, Saudi Arabia, provided finances. Iran continued to be 'demonised' by the United States when it should have been won over diplomatically to serve US strategic interests in the Gulf. Missile proliferation in West Asia continued with Chinese and North Korean assistance as a result of American permissiveness towards China and tolerating Chinese Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBM) deployment in Saudi Arabia – the first ever such deployment in West Asia. Iraq was subjected to unending economic sanctions, chiefly sponsored by the United States, for more than a decade. This further outraged the local community against US policies. The United States had thus totally missed the political logic and dynamics in Iraq.

Post Iraq War

After the second military invasion of Iraq, the United States has not been able to produce any evidence of Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) despite their military occupation. The picture today is that Iraq lies devastated by US military bombardments and is in civil chaos and turmoil. Baghdad today, is more unsafe than ever before, with the gradual increase in Shia dominated territory around the city. The US has been unable to restore law and order in Iraq. Anti-Americanism is in the forefront, falsifying US hopes that they would be welcomed as 'liberators'. Major European countries like France and Germany (and even Turkey) are unlikely to underwrite Iraqi reconstruction for some time. The US roadmap of democracy for West Asia can be expected to gather dust, as contemporary developments in Iraq will force the US once again to temporise on tactical gains rather than strategic

vision. The US has publicly declared Syria and Iran as the next targets after Iraq. This will create greater strategic problems for the US. Islamic *jihadi* terrorism of the Al Qaeda networks has reared its head in Saudi Arabia and extended to Morocco — a stone's throw from Europe. US targets could be next on the list. Saudi Arabia stands sidelined by the US. Turkey is no longer an obliging entity in West Asia for US military adventures. The US has been unable to strategically pacify Iraq or West Asia. The emerging domestic scene in Iraq foretells that it may be heading towards "Islamic fundamentalism" and a Khomeini-type Shia revolution. Any US attempt to redraw state boundaries in West Asia may rebound on it.

LOCAL MILITANT GROUPS AND THEIR AFFILIATIONS

Hezbollah or the Party of God

Hezbollah was founded in 1982 in response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and subsumed members of the 1980s coalition of groups known as Islamic Jihad. It has close links to Iran and Syria. Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah is considered the group's spiritual leader. Hassan Nasrallah is Hezbollah's senior political leader. Nasrallah was originally a military commander, but his military and religious credentials — he studied in centres of Shiite theology in Iran and Iraq — quickly elevated him to leadership within the group. Experts say he took advantage of rivalries within Hezbollah and the favour of the head of Iran's theocratic government, Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, to become the group's Secretary General in 1992, a position he still holds. Its base is in Lebanon's Shia-dominated areas, including parts of Beirut, southern Lebanon, and the Bekaa Valley. In addition, US intelligence reports say that Hezbollah cells operate in Europe, Africa, South America, and even North America.⁵ The organisation operates against Israel in four main ways:

- Bringing terrorists and collaborators through the border crossings using foreign documents.

5. "Hezbollah, The Party of God," accessed at http://www.cfr.org/publication/9155/hezbollah_aka_hizzbollah_hizbullah.html, on June 30, 2010.

- Setting up a terrorist organisation inside Israel and in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip.
- Cross-border operations — smuggling weapons and terrorists.
- Financial support for Palestinian organisations and groups.

Hezbollah was initially established by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards who came to Lebanon during the 1982 “Peace for Galilee” War, as part of the policy of exporting the Islamic revolution.

Hezbollah sources assert that the organisation has about 5,000-10,000 fighters. Other sources report that Hezbollah’s militia consists of a core of about 300-400 fighters, which can be expanded to up to 3,000 within a few hours if a battle with Israel develops. These reserves presumably are called in from Hezbollah strongholds in Lebanon, including the Bekaa Valley and Beirut’s southern suburbs. The number of members involved in combat activity in southern Lebanon is under 1,000. But it has many activists and moral supporters. After the Israeli withdrawal, Hezbollah reduced the number of full time fighters to about 500, though estimates range from 300 to 1,200. There are also several thousand reserves, but these lack training or experience. Hezbollah operates in the Al Biqa’ (Bekaa Valley), the southern suburbs of Beirut, and southern Lebanon. It has established cells in Europe, Africa, South America, North America, and elsewhere. Its training bases are mostly in the previously Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley, and its headquarters and offices are in southern Beirut and in Ba’albek. Hezbollah’s militia is a light force, equipped with small arms, such as automatic rifles, mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, and Katyusha rockets, which it has occasionally fired on towns in northern Israel. Hezbollah forces are shown on television conducting military parades in Beirut, which often include tanks and armoured personnel carriers that may have been captured from the Lebanese Army or purchased from Palestinian guerrillas or other sources.

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amounts of financial, training, weapons, explosives, political, diplomatic, and organisational aid from Iran and Syria. Iran probably provides financial assistance and military assistance worth about US \$25-50 million. Hezbollah is closely allied with, and often directed by, Iran, but has the capability and willingness to act independently. It may have conducted operations that were not approved by Tehran. Though Hezbollah does not share the Syrian regime's secular orientation, the group has been a strong ally in helping Syria advance its political

objectives in the region. Besides operating a worldwide network of fund raisers, money is also raised through so-called 'charity funds'. Some of these are extremist Islamic institutions that, while not directly connected to Hezbollah, support it, albeit marginally, in view of their radical Islamic orientation. While some of these funds undoubtedly pay for Hezbollah's military and terrorist operations, other funds enable the group to provide its members with day jobs, to drape itself in a veil of legitimacy, and to build grassroots support among not only Shia, but also Sunni and Christian Lebanese. In March 2005, Hezbollah organised a large demonstration to protest American and other international pressure on Syria to completely withdraw from Lebanon. Syria did subsequently withdraw its military and intelligence forces. The Syrian withdrawal left a vacuum for Iran to expand its influence in Lebanon and on Hezbollah.

Hamas

Hamas grew out of the Muslim Brotherhood, a religious and political organisation founded in Egypt with branches throughout the Arab world. Beginning in the late 1960s, Hamas' founder and spiritual leader, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, preached and did charitable work in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, both of which were occupied by Israel following the 1967 Six-Day War. In 1973, Yassin established al-Mujamma' al-Islami (the Islamic Centre) to coordinate the Muslim Brotherhood's political activities in Gaza.

Yassin founded Hamas as the Muslim Brotherhood's local political arm in December 1987, following the eruption of the *first intifada*, a Palestinian uprising against Israeli control of the West Bank and Gaza. Hamas published its official charter in 1988, moving decidedly away from the Muslim Brotherhood's ethos of non-violence.

Historically, Hamas has operated as an opposition group in Gaza, the West Bank, and inside Israel. Most of the population of Gaza and the West Bank is officially ruled by the Palestinian Authority government, so Hamas' new role as the legislature's controlling party has forced the group to reconsider the function and scope of its operations. For instance, since taking power in 2006, Hamas leaders have embarked on several diplomatic visits throughout the region. Early on, some observers hoped that political legitimacy — and the accountability that comes with it — could wean Hamas away from violence. But to date, the group has refused to eschew violence and remains adamant about reversing the decision by its rival faction, the more secular Fatah movement, to recognise Israel's right to exist. In the summer of 2007, Hamas' tensions with the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, a Fatah man, came to a head and Hamas routed Fatah supporters, killing many and sending others fleeing to the West Bank. The result was a *de facto* geographic division of Palestinian-held territory, with Hamas holding sway in Gaza and Fatah maintaining the internationally recognised Palestinian Authority government in the West Bank town of Ramallah. Egyptian efforts to reconcile the two factions came to nothing. Since coming to power in Gaza, rockets fired from the Hamas enclave have consistently landed on Israeli cities near the border, sometimes producing casualties. Israel has consistently alleged that Iranian and other weapons were being smuggled into Gaza through a series of tunnels, and with Egypt, maintained tight control on the enclave's borders. International aid agencies say this led to severe shortages. A six-month ceasefire calmed things somewhat in 2008, but toward the end of the year, Hamas called off the truce and resumed firing rockets into Israel. The response was an air assault in late December and, in the first week of 2009, a full blown Israeli invasion of the territory.

Hamas combines Palestinian nationalism with Islamic fundamentalism. Its founding charter commits the group to the destruction of Israel, the replacement of the Palestine Authority with an Islamist state on the West Bank and Gaza, and to raising “the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine.” Its leaders have called suicide attacks the “F-16” of the Palestinian people. In July 2009, Khaled Meshaal said Hamas was willing to cooperate with the United States on promoting a resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Hamas, he said, would accept a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders provided Palestinian refugees are allowed to return to Israel and East Jerusalem is recognised as the Palestinian capital. The proposal fell short of recognising the state of Israel, a necessary step for Hamas to be included in the peace talks.

In addition to its military wing, the so-called Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigade, Hamas devotes much of its estimated \$70-million annual budget to an extensive social services network. The extensive social and political work done by Hamas — and its reputation among Palestinians as averse to corruption — partly explain its defeat of the Fatah old guard in the 2006 legislative vote. Hamas funds schools, orphanages, mosques, and healthcare clinics, soup kitchens, and sports leagues. “Approximately 90 percent of its work is in social, welfare, cultural, and educational activities,” writes the Israeli scholar Reuven Paz.⁶ The Palestinian Authority often fails to provide such services, and Hamas’ efforts in this area — as well as a reputation for honesty, in contrast to the many Fatah officials accused of corruption — help to explain the broad popularity it summoned to defeat Fatah in the Palestine Authority’s recent elections.

Hamas’ military wing is believed to have more than 1,000 active members and thousands of supporters and sympathisers. Since its electoral victory to lead the Palestine Authority, Hamas has had public funds at its disposal, though it does not have access to the foreign-aid dollars traditionally

6. Reuven Paz (born on November 14, 1950) is an Israeli scholar specialising in Islam and Islamic movements in the Arab and Muslim world, the Arab minority in Israel and Islamic fundamentalism. He has previously been head of the research department for the Israeli General Security Service. He has also previously lectured at the University of Haifa, and is the Academic Director for the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism.

provided by the United States and European Union to the Palestine Authority. Historically, much of Hamas' funding came from Palestinian expatriates and private donors in Saudi Arabia and other oil-rich Persian Gulf states. Iran also provides significant support, which some diplomats say could amount to US \$20 million to \$30 million per year. In addition, some Muslim charities in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe funnel money into Hamas-backed social service groups. In December 2001, the Bush Administration seized the assets of the Holy Land Foundation, the largest Muslim charity in the United States, on suspicions it was funding Hamas.

According to Palestinian Khalil Shikaki,⁷ in late 2006, Hamas still enjoyed public backing, though most Palestinians also wanted to see a negotiated settlement with Israel. According to Lt Gen Keith Dayton, the US security coordinator for Israel and the Palestinian Territories, brutal internal clashes in Gaza have caused Hamas to lose some goodwill among the Palestinians. In fact, the group has a history of fluctuating approval: following the collapse of the peace process in the late 1990s, Hamas' popularity rose as Arafat's fell. In the spring of 2002, during a period of intensified armed conflict between Israeli security forces and Hamas militants, polls showed that Arafat's Fatah faction of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and the Islamists each commanded support from roughly 30 percent of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza (the remaining Palestinians were either independent, undecided, or supported other factions). But trust in Hamas reportedly dropped in 2004. In a poll conducted by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre (JMCC) after Arafat's death, 18.6 percent of Palestinians named Hamas as the Palestinian faction they most trusted, down from 23 percent a year earlier. Hamas experienced a short-lived spike in popularity after the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in August 2005; after a rocket explosion at a Hamas rally on September 23, 2005, that killed 15 people, Hamas blamed Israel and launched rocket attacks against it. Israel retaliated with punitive air strikes, which the Palestinians blamed Hamas

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for provoking. The explosion was revealed to be an accident. In late 2008 and early 2009, during another violent flare-up which resulted in Israeli land raids into the Gaza Strip, several news agencies reported that Hamas' popularity had stayed constant or even increased.

Jaish al Mahdi or the Mahdi Army

Following the collapse of the Ba'athist regime led by Saddam, Iraq's major cities erupted in a wave of looting that was directed mostly at government offices and other public institutions, and there were severe outbreaks of violence — both common criminal violence and acts of reprisal against the former ruling clique. The sectarian violence that engulfed the country caused enormous chaos, with brutal killings by rival Shia and Sunni militias. One such Shia militia group, the Mahdi Army, formed by cleric Muqtada al-Sadr in the summer of 2003, has been particularly deadly in its battle against the Sunnis and US and Iraqi forces.⁸ Muqtada al-Sadr has been on everybody's radar, especially after emerging victorious in the elections in Baghdad, winning 40 of the 70 seats taken by the Iraqi National Alliance. His victory was testimony that those who preach political Islam are not yet completely defeated in Iraq, although politicians with similar programmes, like the Iran-backed Ammar al-Hakim of the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (SIIC) have suffered a severe reversal of fortunes, losing approximately 70 seats in Parliament, and eight out of 11 provinces.

The Mahdi Army, which led an uprising against the Americans in April-June 2004, was frozen for two years after having been implicated in a sectarian civil war in 2006-07. When Maliki first came to power in May 2006, it helped polish his image in the slums of Baghdad and within strongholds like Mosul, Basra and Karbala. Mahdi Army affiliates were given influential government posts like the Ministries of Health, Education and Commerce, along with 30 seats in Parliament, and a gentleman's agreement to be excluded from any persecution by government authorities for their public carrying of light

8. "Mahdi Army, 2010," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, accessed at <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1293112/Mahdi-Army>, on June 30, 2010.

arms. In exchange, they pledged to uphold Maliki, legitimising him among young Shias who saw him as a political nobody at the time, drumming up support for him in rallies and at public demonstrations against his enemies. The honeymoon between Maliki and the Mahdi Army came to an end in the summer of 2007 over the Prime Minister's refusal to call for a timetable for withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. Since then, although persecuted periodically by government authorities, the Mahdi Army has kept a low profile, invisible on the streets in places other than Sadr City, for example. Muqtada then came out to call on them to freeze all paramilitary activity for a renewable six-month period, hinting at a truce with the central government. Many predicted that Muqtada had unwillingly called on his men to give up their arms, so he could better assimilate with the post-Saddam Hussein order, realising that arms alone, with no diplomatic conduct, would never liberate Iraq from occupation. Muqtada's approval will ultimately make or break any incoming Prime Minister, just as it did with Ibrahim al-Jaafari and Nuri al-Maliki in 2005-06. Coinciding with his recent political victories, Muqtada has announced that his Mahdi Army, which had been frozen for nearly two years, is back in full operation. The Mahdi Army is estimated at anywhere between 10,000-20,000 men. Muqtada has been working hard to transform the Mahdi Army into another Hezbollah, personally inspired by Hassan Nasrallah. He froze all activities of the Mahdi Army, so he could take a long hard look at membership and filter out the indisciplined, the reckless and the corrupt (of whom there were plenty in 2003-07). He went back to the seminary, so he could elevate his academic credentials and rise from the rank of Sayyid to that of Ayatollah (which enables him to issue *fatwas* and grants him greater authority within the Shia community at large). And that explains why, against all odds, he has insisted on refraining from any sectarian rhetoric, copying the Nasrallah model in Lebanon, who always speaks of Lebanon, not of Shias. Muqtada has also copied Hezbollah's massive charity network, monopolising education, hospitals and fund-raising within the Shia districts of Iraq to make sure that no family goes to bed hungry and all receive a monthly stipend from the Mahdi Army. Much like a modern Robin Hood, Muqtada is arming and

The region has myriad combinations of religious, ethnic, ideological, political, economic and even criminal alliances/ allegiances between the various groups.

training himself to become spokesmen, defender and leader for the poor of Iraq.⁹

THE COMPLICATED ALLIANCES/ EQUATIONS BETWEEN DIFFERENT GROUPS

The region has myriad combinations of religious, ethnic, ideological, political, economic and even criminal alliances/allegiances between the various groups that play a role or *strive* to play

a role in the regional power struggle that goes beyond traditional national boundaries. Some of them are enumerated in the following paragraphs:

- **Religious/ Ethnic Distribution:** Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia form the Sunni majority states, accompanied by the smaller Kuwait, Qatar and Gaza, while Iran and Iraq have a Shia majority, along with Bahrain, and smaller but significant numbers in Eastern Saudi Arabia and parts of Syria and Kuwait. Lebanon has an almost equal number of Sunnis, Shias and a mix of other ethnic groups. The recent rise of Shia power in Iraq and the growing Iranian inclination to exercise influence over them has only complicated the situation, leading to Saudi fears of a Shia dominated Iraq, which would not only assume control over the Sunni regions but also wield greater influence over the sizeable Shia population in the Persian Gulf rim states. This also has implications in the way the different militant groups interact with each other.
- **Inter-State Rivalries:** The various inter-state rivalries have taken a more covert shape of late. Saudi Arabia looks at Iran as a rival for regional leadership; Iranian Shias are hated by the Iraqi Sunnis, who, in turn, are engaged in violent struggles against the Iraqi Shias and the Kurds; the Kurds are at loggerheads with Turkey for its opposition to a Kurdish state; the Kurds hope to maintain their autonomy in oil-rich Northern Iraq, much against the wishes of the Iraqi Sunnis — who dominate central Iraq — but with hardly any natural resources, as the rest of the oil is under

9. Sami Moubayed, Syrian political analyst with Asia Times Online (Holdings) Ltd., accessed at http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East, on June 30, 2010.

Shia control in the south; the Iraqis are furious with the Syrians for allowing foreign insurgents to cross the borders into Iraq; Israel, on its part, is a sworn enemy of Syria, Iran and Iraq, and faces hostility from Saudi Arabia. The plot only gets thicker when one considers the secondary conflicts between Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran, combined with the presence of US and Allied troops in the region — in Saudi Arabia and Iraq, which indicates the presence of US intelligence agencies, along with their British, German, French and Israeli counterparts. It would be extremely difficult to monitor on a daily basis who is talking to whom, how and where the funds, arms and drugs are flowing and what is likely to happen the next day.

The role of militant groups like Hezbollah, Hamas, or Mahdi Army remains significant.

- **Non-State Militia and Insurgents:** Saudi Arabia has been known to be funding and aiding the Muslim Brotherhood against Egypt, and Hamas in Gaza to wage war against Israel and Jordan. Iran helps Hezbollah in Lebanon fight the Israelis from the north; Hamas and Hezbollah, though belonging to rival Sunni and Shia factions, seem to cooperate in their attacks on Israel. The Saudis have been critical of Iranian support to Hezbollah, as the Saudi reconstruction effort in Lebanon has been bombed by the Israelis in retaliation to attacks by Hezbollah. Egypt has been critical of both Hamas and Hezbollah — Hamas, because it is the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Hezbollah, because Hamas has been supporting Hezbollah's attacks which led to military escalation by Israel.

The Future Scenario

The role of militant groups like Hezbollah, Hamas, or Mahdi Army remains significant. While Hezbollah and Hamas are a thorn in the flesh of Israel, the Mahdi Army remains influential in Iraq, both militarily and politically. The US Army controls only certain urban pockets in Iraq, whereas the Mahdis have access to most rural areas too. The US is not

likely to leave Iraq or Afghanistan in the near future. We will most likely see permanent American bases here even if the US withdraws in 2011 as planned. Looking at the map, one can visualise US Central Command (CENTCOM) headquartered in Qatar, with bases in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan and also in Azerbaijan and other Central Asian countries, with an eye on Russia, China and other important countries. China and Russia are emerging powers competing with the US, and Iran's natural resources are nearby, too. The world's second largest oil and gas reserves are present in Central Asia, and keeping 'peak oil' in mind, the race is on for oil reserves. According to some senior analysts, US bases at Bagram and elsewhere will remain, even if the US and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) withdraw, because these bases will be a US check on regional powers. China has invested millions of dollars in Central Asian oil and gas reserves. It sees the American presence in Afghanistan as a direct threat. Anything which happens in the region affects China and its economy. Russia had to fight US proxies in Georgia over the Ceyhan-Baku pipeline to safeguard its interests. Hence, US presence in its area of influence is not welcomed by the Russians either. France and Germany both have been reluctant to send more troops to Afghanistan. The European Union (EU) is emerging as a major economy and has its own strategic perceptions and approaches. India, in the meanwhile, for all its pragmatism in dealing with the US, on the one hand, and the West Asian nations, on the other, has its task quite cut out in striking a balance between its geo-political pragmatism, national interests, role as an emerging power and contender for a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), its energy security and the lingering Nehruvian legacy image as the erstwhile outspoken leader of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Third World countries (an image that is still live in the memory of a lot of developing countries that look up to India for leadership and solidarity).

INDIAN DIASPORA IN THE REGION

Indians in West Asia

There is a huge population of Indians in West Asia, especially in the oil rich monarchies neighbouring the Persian Gulf. Most of them moved to the Gulf after the oil boom to work as labourers and in clerical jobs. However, a significant minority are also employed in the highest echelons of major banks and corporations or have prospered greatly through conducting business in the region. Indians in the Gulf do not normally become citizens. They retain their Indian passports since most of the countries in the Gulf do not provide citizenship or permanent residency. However, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia now allow limited forms of naturalisation to persons who have stayed in the country for 20 years. One of the major reasons Indians still like to work in the Gulf is because of the tax-free income it provides and its proximity to India.

Migration to the Gulf Countries

The oil boom in the Gulf countries that began in the early 1970s created an explosion in the global labour market. The unprecedented developmental activities that took place in the oil rich countries of the region called for large-scale recruitment of migrant labourers. Iraq, Iran, Yemen and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Sultanate of Oman and United Arab Emirates) started recruiting large numbers of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labourers and a range of professionals to build their cities and to develop the infrastructure for the developing oil economies.

The general pattern of the migration to Gulf countries was that while most of the top positions in the economy in almost all sectors went to the migrant professionals from the Western nations, the remaining jobs had to be shared by migrants from the rest of the world, mainly from South and Southeast Asia, Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria. With the exception of Iraq and Iran where educated professionals for the top positions were available locally, most other nations in West Asia followed

this pattern. Even within this non-white employment sector, most of the unskilled or semi-skilled jobs were reserved for migrants from South and Southeast Asia. By the late 1980s, nearly 80 percent of the total migrant population in the GCC countries, *which was substantially higher than the native Arab population*, were migrant labourers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia. According to the Report of the High Level Committee on the Indian diaspora by the Ministry of External Affairs in 2003, there are nearly three million migrant labourers working and living in these six GCC countries. Nearly 70 percent of this migrant community hails from the state of Kerala. Nearly 70 percent of these migrants in the GCC are semi-skilled or unskilled labourers. After three and half decades of labour export, the state of Kerala continues to be the leader in this trade.

This emigration is voluntary in nature, but its trends and conditions are determined by labour market vagaries. It is a predominantly male migration, characterised by uninterrupted ties with the families and communities back in India. This cannot be otherwise as in most of the West Asian countries, the immigrant labourers cannot settle down, and have neither property rights nor the freedom to practise their own religion (other than Islam).

Gulf Indians and their Condition

There is a huge population of Indians in West Asia, most coming from Kerala and other South Indian states, especially in the oil rich countries neighbouring the Persian Gulf. One of the major reasons why Indians like to work in the Gulf is because it provides incomes many times over for the same type of job back in India and for its geographical proximity to India. The Indian diaspora makes up a good proportion of the working class in the GCC. In 2005, about 40 percent of the population in the United Arab Emirates was of Indian descent. The GCC states include Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman. The Non-Resident Indian (NRI) population in these countries is estimated to be around 6,000,000 (2006-07), of whom over 1,500,000 stay in the UAE. A majority of them originate from Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and

Tamil Nadu. The NRI population tends to save and remit a considerable amount to their dependents in India. It is estimated that such remittances may be over US \$40 billion per annum (including remittances by formal and informal channels).

A generation ago, George Lamming wrote that Indian hands had humanised the landscapes of much of the Caribbean and put food on dinner tables. 'Coolie' labour, as it was once called, built Trinidad, Guyana, and Surinam — and, of course, places far beyond the Caribbean. The system of indentured labour officially came to a close in 1917, but the sorry state of Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis in the Gulf today suggests that its modern-day incarnations are very much alive; if anything, amidst the hullabaloo over globalisation, human rights, and 'India Shining', the contract labourers of today have less visibility and fewer people advocating their rights.

The newspapers reported a few years ago that 4,000 South Asian workers in Dubai faced deportation. Dubai is the international face of the UAE, a federation of seven autonomous states. Flush with oil money over the last few decades, the UAE has spared no expense to transform the desert kingdoms into contemporary hubs of leisure, travel, and business. Millions of Indians, Bangladeshis, and Pakistanis have turned Dubai into a glittering metropolis, home to the world's tallest building, super luxury homes and hotels, and artificial islands for water sports. Despite the recent meltdown, Dubai appears to be a city dedicated to bringing cheer to those who are desirous of nothing more lofty than giving truth to the expression: 'shop till you drop dead'. Models, movie stars, media moguls, and others of the high social set increasingly frequent Dubai and the Gulf states. However, the 'native' and foreign elites are vastly outnumbered by, and parasitic on, an immense labour force that is largely of South Asian origin. The UAE presently has about 1.5 million South Asians employed as contract labourers, the bulk of them engaged in construction work. Human Rights Watch has described their working conditions in a report as "less than human" and has called upon the governments of the UAE to end abusive labour practices. The 4,000 South Asians who faced deportation were charged with acts of

vandalism, but their real offence was to have struck work over poor wages and exploitative working conditions. The UAE does not recognise the right to strike and unions are illegal. Salaries in the UAE for contract labourers range from about 500 to 1000 dirhams (\$136-270) a month.

The term NRI purports to be neutral, and India has lately (for instance, through the device of the annual gatherings called the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas) claimed all its children overseas as its own, but the truth of the matter is that the Indian government, has seldom been attentive to the plight of Indians in countries where they were brought over as indentured labourers. Apologists will point to the Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Government of India and the United Arab Emirates in December 2006 that obligates the two governments to ensure the welfare and protection of Indian workers. This area needs careful and progressive effort – as even if there are military solutions to some contingencies like large scale evacuation, both Indian defence forces and the political leadership are not prepared either in terms of physical resources or political will. Both the evacuation during the Gulf War, 1991, and the Male operation were carried out under very different circumstances and would be an incorrect precedence in today's context. At the same time, India needs to be more assertive diplomatically in dealing with issues pertaining to Indian citizens/ Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) residing abroad, else incidents like the ones in Australia and the UAE will keep recurring. In other words, greater coercive use of Indian diplomatic and economic leverages is required to support the Indian community abroad, while maintaining 'cordial relations' with the nation concerned.

The Future of Indians in the Diaspora

Though Indians lived under conditions of appalling poverty in many places of the world where they were first taken as indentured labour, a number of remarkable transformations were effected over two or three generations. Through sheer perseverance, labour, and thrift, and most significantly by a calculated withdrawal into their culture in which they found forces of sustenance, these Indians successfully laboured to give their children and

grandchildren better economic futures, and they in time came to capture the trade and commerce of their new homelands. This was just as true in South Africa, Kenya, and Uganda as it was in Trinidad, Mauritius, and Burma. In Trinidad, though the minuscule population of whites continues today to control the banks and financial services, the Indians dominate in industry and entrepreneurial enterprises. Their affluence in such countries as the United States is even more pronounced, as is their presence within the professions. Indians account for well over 5 percent of the scientists, engineers, and software specialists; and no group, except whites, Japanese, and Jewish people, has a higher per capita income than Indians. However, in Africa, wherever Indians were able to establish themselves, they became indispensable as the principal arteries of trade, shopkeepers to the nation, and so opened themselves to the charge that they had done so by illicit activities, by marginalising the local population, and with no other thought than of enhancing their own interests and prosperity. These charges were, more often than not, preposterous and, in any case, could scarcely have justified the cruel and brutal treatment meted out to Indians in such places as Uganda, from where Idi Amin effected their wholesale and immediate removal, or Kenya, from where their eviction was only slightly less callous.

Thus, the position of Indians overseas has always been precarious, and this problem was underlined soon after Burma attained independence in 1948. Indians were prominent property owners, and significant in business and trading circles; their property was appropriated by the state, their possessions confiscated, and many Indians were exiled. When the Indian community appealed to Nehru for assistance, he took the position that this was a matter between them and the Burmese state, and India was unable to intervene in the internal affairs of a foreign state; moreover, Indians who had been settled overseas were to reconcile themselves to the fact that, having abjured Indian citizenship, they had no substantial claims on India. This has, in effect, been the position of successive Indian governments to this day, though, as India acquires more muscle power, or certainly imagines itself to be a major player on the world scene, there is no gainsaying that

The question of what must be the relationship between overseas Indians, whether citizens of India or of another nation, and the Indian government is one that knows of no easy solution.

the Indian government might not attempt to use its influence to protect the lives and interests of those who, though they may not be Indian citizens, are Indians in ancestry.

Where Indians have gone as labourers on short-term work permits, as is the case with Indian migration to the Middle East, the Indian government is duty bound to lodge, whenever necessary, protests over their ill-treatment, or to otherwise act to protect their lives and property.

In the days subsequent to Kuwait's invasion of Iraq in 1990, and before the beginning of the war between Iraq and the US in 1991, the Indian government took upon itself the mammoth task of evacuating the greater part of the Middle East's Indian population, and it did so at the request of a panic-stricken people who could claim their Indian citizenship as a passport to safety. That most of these Indians have returned to the Gulf is another story, but the question of what must be the relationship between overseas Indians, whether citizens of India or of another nation, and the Indian government is one that knows of no easy solution. The dissolution of a democratically-elected government, as in Fiji, for no other reason than that it was headed by an Indian, even in a country where they predominate, points to the fragile position of Indians, and the discriminatory and blatantly racist mechanisms deployed to keep them subjugated.

However tempting it might be for the Indian government to intervene to protect the interests of Indians who are foreign nationals, the brute fact remains that India can do little more than indicate its displeasure with the allegedly offending party. It is for Indians in the diaspora to forge links between themselves, to enter into coalitions with other minorities and marginalised people, and more significantly, to formulate for themselves moral, sensitive, and democratic politics.

INDIA'S WEST-ASIA POLICY

India has traditionally pursued a pro-Arab policy regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict in order to counteract Pakistani influence in the region and to secure access to Middle East petroleum resources. In the 1950s and early 1960s, this pro-Arab stance may not have helped India in establishing good relations with all the Arab countries but it served to keep peace with its own Muslim minority. India concentrated on developing a close relationship with Egypt on the strength of Nehru's ties with Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser. But the New Delhi-Cairo friendship was insufficient to counteract Arab sympathy for Pakistan in its dispute with India. Furthermore, Indian-Egyptian ties came at the expense of cultivating relations with such countries as Saudi Arabia and Jordan and, thus, limited India's influence in the region.

In the late 1960s and in the 1970s, India successfully improved bilateral relations by developing mutually beneficial economic exchanges with a number of Islamic countries, particularly Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the other Persian Gulf states. The strength of India's economic ties enabled it to build strong relationships with Iran and Iraq, which helped India weather the displeasure of the Islamic countries stemming from India's war with Pakistan in 1971. Indian-Middle Eastern relations were further strengthened by New Delhi's anti-Israeli stance in the Arab-Israeli Wars of 1967 and 1973 and its support for the four-fold oil price rise in 1973 by the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Closer ties with the Middle Eastern countries were dictated by India's dependency on petroleum imports. Oil represented 8 percent of India's total imports in 1971; 42 percent in 1981; and 28 percent in 1991. India purchased oil from Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait and, in return, provided engineering services, manufactured goods, and labour. The 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War forced India to shift its oil purchases from Iran and Iraq to Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states also have received large numbers of Indian workers and manufacturers and have become the regional base for Indian business operations.

New Delhi took a position of neutrality in the Iran-Iraq War, maintained warm ties with Baghdad, and built workable political and economic relations with Tehran despite misgivings about the foreign policy goals of the Khomeini regime.

Two events in 1978 and 1979 — the installation of the Islamic regime under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in support of the pro-Soviet Marxist regime in Kabul — complicated India's relations with the Middle East countries. From the Indian perspective, these two events and the Iran-Iraq War changed the balance of power in West Asia by weakening Iran as a regional power and a potential supporter of Pakistan, a situation favourable to India. At the same time, proxy

superpower competition in Afghanistan strengthened the hand of India's adversary Pakistan by virtue of the military support Pakistan received from the United States, China, and the Arab states led by Saudi Arabia. In the 1980s, India performed a delicate diplomatic balancing act. New Delhi took a position of neutrality in the Iran-Iraq War, maintained warm ties with Baghdad, and built workable political and economic relations with Tehran despite misgivings about the foreign policy goals of the Khomeini regime. India managed to improve relations with the Middle Eastern countries that provided support to the Afghan Mujahideen and Pakistan by redirecting Indian petroleum purchases to Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf countries. New Delhi, which had traditionally had close relations with Kabul, condemned the Soviet invasion only in the most perfunctory manner and provided diplomatic, economic, and logistic support for the Marxist regime.

In the early 1990s, India stepped back from its staunch anti-Israeli stance and support for the Palestinian cause. Besides practical economic and security considerations in the post-Cold War world, domestic politics played a role in this reversal. In December 1991, India voted with the UN majority to repeal the UN resolution equating Zionism with racism. In 1992, following the example of the Soviet Union and China, India established diplomatic relations with Israel.

During the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War, Indian policy-makers were torn between adopting a traditional non-aligned policy sympathetic to Iraq or favouring the coalition of moderate Arab and Western countries that could benefit Indian security and economic interests. India initially adopted an ambivalent approach, condemning both the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the intrusion of external forces into the region. Under a minority government in November 1990, the Indian response changed. Wary of incurring the displeasure of the United States and other Western nations on whom India depended to obtain assistance from the International Monetary Fund, India voted for the UN resolution authorising the use of force to expel Iraqi troops from Kuwait and rejected Iraq's linkage of the Kuwaiti and Palestinian problems. In January 1991, India also permitted United States military aircraft to refuel in Bombay. The refuelling decision stirred such domestic controversy that the government withdrew the refuelling privileges in February 1991 to deflect the criticism of the Congress, which argued that India's nominal pro-United States tilt had betrayed the country's non-aligned principles. Today, under the same Congress, we are probably closer than ever before to the US. Hence, Indian strategic alignments can be said to have been pragmatic and evolving with time, despite domestic vote-bank politics.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

India, soon after attaining independence in 1947, became the voice of the underdeveloped Third World under Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and remained so under the banner of NAM. The Nehruvian policies were probably apt for the 1950s and 1960s, but the legacy continued till much later. Due to this political posture, India sacrificed an offer to become a part of the Security Council in favour of China (which paid back the goodwill gesture in its own way — in 1962); India continued holding the Third World/NAM banner at its own cost through to the 1980s, suffered post 1974 and 1998 sanctions on its own, and once again stood alone and isolated (except by the

10. Dr Subhash Kapila, "India's Foreign Policy Challenges 2005: A Perspective Analysis", available at: <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers13/paper1223.html>, as accessed on July 1, 2010

The dynamics of instability and conflict in West Asia remain volatile as ever. US Army presence in the region, bracketing Iran from both West and East has complicated the scenario further.

USSR) after the 1971 liberation of Bangladesh. In 1991, India had just over US \$1 billion worth of forex reserves, resulting in a paradigm shift in not only India's economic policy, but also its foreign policy and posture towards the US and the West in general. The pro-Arab and anti-West stance thus stood modified, and since then, India's foreign policy has trod a pragmatic path, dictated by its economic policy as well as an awakening that the times had changed and India could (and should) start thinking in terms

of becoming a regional power, with global impact, if not aspirations.

The dynamics of instability and conflict in West Asia remain as volatile as ever. US Army presence in the region, bracketing Iran from both West and East, has complicated the scenario further. Iran's stand with respect to its nuclear programme has put India in a tricky situation diplomatically, as it clashes with Indian aspirations to become a nuclear fuel supplier, and its stand on non-proliferation. In recent times, there has been an increased effort by the Indian diplomacy to engage both Shia and Sunni Arab Gulf nations through bilateral talks on trade, oil exploration, infrastructure building and related issues. India has been engaged with Saudi Arabia and UAE despite knowledge of their ties with the Taliban. India's Foreign Minister and Ministry officials have visited a few countries in the region in an effort to improve bilateral understanding on various issues, including India's stand on nuclear proliferation. There has been increased cooperation with the region on the issues of extradition, sharing data on crime, etc. However, the dynamics of the region are such that alignments and power equations change without much warning, and require a constant focus to achieve a semblance of continuity and balance in the ever-changing game.

India's growing diaspora in the West Asian countries — especially the Persian Gulf nations — poses a problem in terms of support (both diplomatic as well as emotional) to the large expatriate population there. The dollar remittances notwithstanding, in today's well-connected world,

any untoward incident involving the Indian population abroad has the potential to become a media story, and perceived inaction on the part of the Indian government could have serious repercussions back home — disturbing both the political and law and order situations. India's foreign policy planners for West Asia also face a big challenge in keeping alive its good relations with Iran in the face of stiff opposition from the United States. The United States — till such time it militarily intervenes in Iran (prevented by its military overstretch and public opinion back home) — has embarked on international isolation of Iran. India should not be a part of any such effort. Both India and Iran must continue to pursue vigorously the thrust enshrined in the Tehran and Delhi Declarations. For different reasons, Israel and Iran assist India's natural security interests and these two should be the focus of India's foreign policy. The old adage in foreign affairs stipulates that *a nation does not have permanent friends or foes; only permanent national interests*.

Thus, India's policy options would be governed by the need to create an atmosphere of confidence amongst the West Asian nations regarding India's stand on various issues, be proactive in dealing with the problems of its large expatriate population in the region, ensure its trade and energy security, while, at the same time, be pragmatic enough to stay clear of alliances with a potential for international dispute. The real test of India as a future regional and economic power would lie in its deft handling of the issues that plague the West Asian region, while maintaining its own national objectives and interests, both medium and long-term.