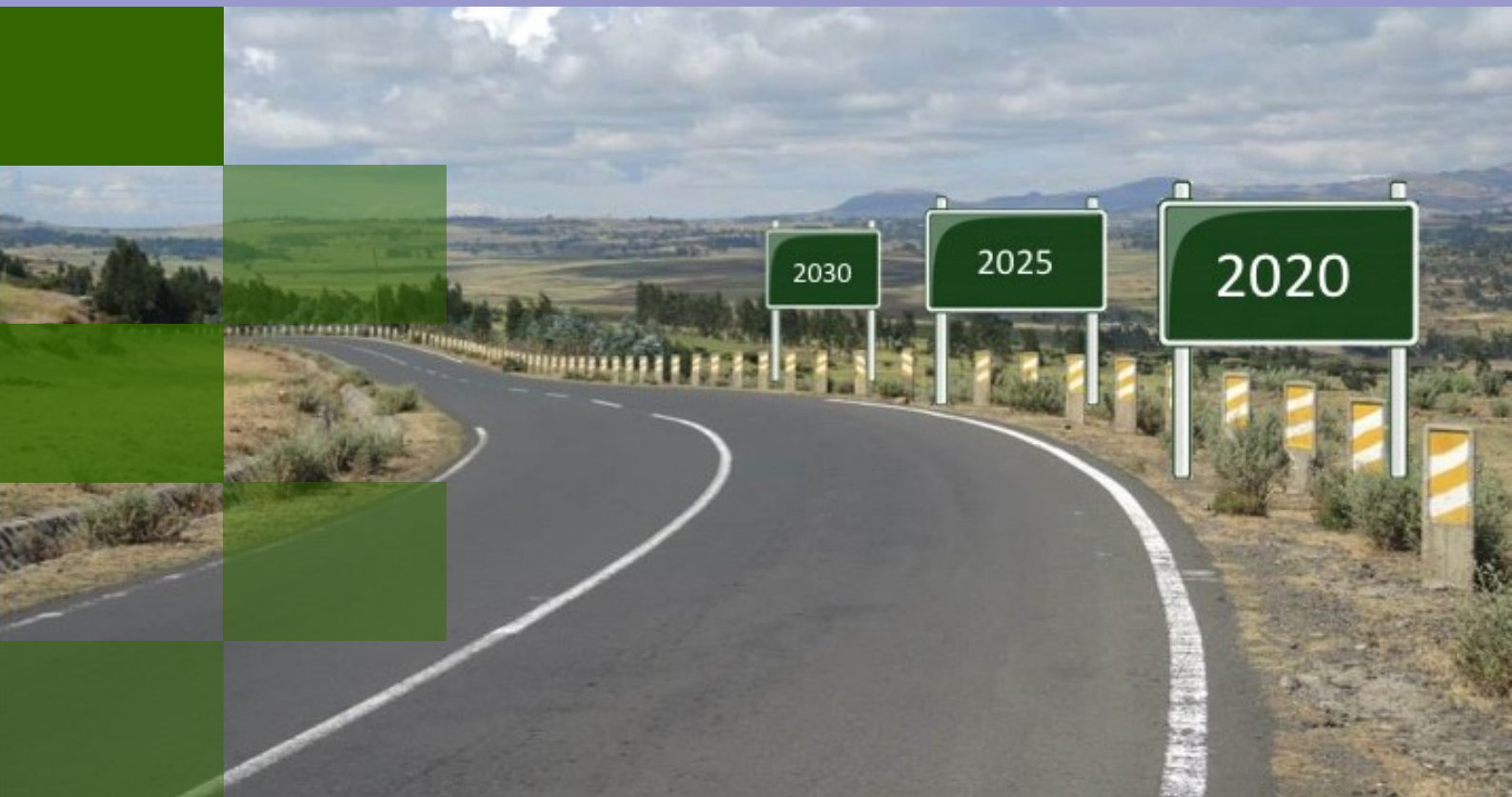


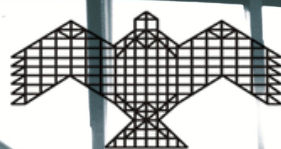
Trends. Threats. Projections

India and the Middle East Crises

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Middle East Today: Major Issues

Iraq has been a broken country since the US invaded it in 2003 and then occupied it for 8 years during which it dismantled wholesale Saddam's Army, the State apparatus and the Baathist Party leaving the Sunnis, the traditional rulers of the country, deeply embittered thus contributing directly and significantly to the rise of the Islamic State, which now controls more than a third of the entire territories of Syria and Iraq. The Islamic State has become the most serious threat within the region and has even demonstrated its destructive reach in Europe, Africa and Asia.

Yemen and Syria are engulfed in unprecedentedly destructive wars. These wars are essentially proxy wars between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In an utterly uncharacteristic and complete departure from the past, three of the six GCC countries— Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE, are very actively militarily involved in these wars at their own initiative and, at least in Yemen, even against the advice of their longstanding U.S. ally; even in Syria, a divergence of approach between the U.S. and these three is becoming steadily more perceptible; despite the U.S. pushing actively for a negotiated settlement, Saudi Arabia and its GCC allies seem determined to continue the fight against Assad.

Following King Salman ascension to the throne, Saudi Arabia's completely uncharacteristic exceedingly muscular and militaristic approach to addressing current problems in West Asia has become the most destabilizing element in the region and the single biggest impediment to a positive transformation in the region. One significant consequence of all this has been that the Israeli-Palestinian standoff which has been continuing for almost seven decades now has been completely marginalised. There are no prospects of any solution on the horizon at all.

Middle East: Future Trends

The noticeable decline in the Islamic State's capabilities and fortunes in the last four months of 2015 will continue – the territory it controlled has been shrinking both in Iraq and Syria; financial resources are diminishing; an enlarging coalition against it has been mounting increasing and more effective attacks - Russia's completely unexpected military intervention in Syria at the end of September 2015 to bolster the Assad regime is becoming more robust and has also been increasingly targeting the Islamic State lately; this intervention prompted the U.S. to intensify its air war against the Islamic State; Daesh attacks against France led to a dramatic increase in French attacks; Daesh attacks against Turkey are transforming it from being a covert ally into a partner, however hesitantly, in the war against Daesh. Assad's Army is witnessing a considerable resurgence due to Russia's arms supplies and robust attacks against its Islamist opponents and it is now taking on Daesh too. Daesh oil production, refining and trade have been declining steadily due to these greatly increasing attacks. Its casualties are rising and recruitment of new fighters and their transit to war zones is getting more difficult.

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The prospects of militarily defeating Assad will steadily diminish. With a determined Russia, an increasingly firm Iranian commitment to Assad, and

rising priority the West is attaching to confronting Daesh, barring fortuitous assassination, Assad will be more strongly entrenched as President at the end of 2016 than he is today.

There is simply no possibility whatsoever of the myriad hundreds of rebel groups fighting Assad reconciling their mutual antipathies and providing possibilities of an alternative government - they cannot even cobble up an agreed team for negotiations. Negotiations between the rebels and the government will not succeed. Preconditions by rebels that attacks by Russia should cease and by Saudi Arabia that Assad should step down first are ludicrous - what cannot be won on the battlefield will obviously not be conceded before or in a conference. The Islamist rebels' strength will continue to diminish through 2016.

The Kurds have been the most successful fighters against Daesh both in Iraq and Syria; they will continue to recover territory from Daesh; they are also consolidating tighter control of their autonomous areas in both countries. The international community will soon need to face a new dilemma - addressing Kurdish aspirations for a state of their own, ignored by the international community for decades, in the context of considerably weakened central governments in Baghdad and Damascus.

There can be no military solution in Yemen. Even if Saudi Arabia somehow manages to install the Al Hadi government in Sana'a, that government simply cannot remain in power without continuing military backing from Saudi Arabia; this clearly is not a sustainable proposition and therefore there has to be a negotiated end to the crisis; the formation of a national government, however difficult it may appear to be now, must be the first step forward. The successful conclusion of the nuclear deal with Iran is a particularly powerful demonstration of the fact that even the most intractable problems can be resolved through negotiations.

There are indications that the intense internal sectarian divide in Iraq that had developed under the Prime Ministership of Nuri Al Maliki will steadily diminish. Russia's intervention in Syria marks its return to West Asia as a very significant player. 2016 will see a consolidation of its presence, influence and role in West Asia for the longer term.

Despite strong criticism domestically for 'losing' Syria and particularly from its Saudi led allies within the region, President Obama has resolutely refused to get militarily involved in any significant way in resolving the post Arab Spring conflicts in the region. President Obama's approach is the right way forward for the US and is likely to have a salutary effect in the longer term in curbing destabilizing foreign interference in the region. 2016 will likely witness enhanced American participation in the war against Daesh; more special operations troops could be needed but despite hints by officials that this may involve boots on the ground, anything like on the scale in the past is highly unlikely. Not only would that be counterproductive but also negate Obama's very significant and very positive foreign policy legacy: re-engagements with Myanmar, Cuba and most significantly with Iran, with a resolute resolve to refrain from unilateral military interventions in West Asia.

The situation cannot get worse than it is. In an interview to the *Economist* (8 January 2016), Saudi Defence Minister and Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said that "War would not be allowed to happen. It is something that we do not foresee at all, and whoever is pushing towards that is somebody who is not in their right mind. For sure we will not allow any such thing." This is particularly reassuring since he is the architect of Saudi Arabia's assertive posture. Given that Iran would get stronger within the region, Assad will get stronger within Syria, Obama will likely continue with its non-interventionist stance, it would steadily get more difficult for Saudi Arabia to sustain its hardline stance both for economic and political reasons. There is no equivalence at all between the comprehensive national strengths of Saudi Arabia and Iran - therefore luckily Iran does not need to become more assertive. Thus, even if the situation does not improve considerably, tensions should start diminishing significantly in 2016.

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India and the Situation in West Asia

The current situation in West Asia should be a matter of very deep concern for India because the policies of the GCC countries and Iran have enormous potential for impacting positively or negatively on India's future well-being and security. India's relations with GCC countries are today India's best external relationship globally. Over the last four decades the GCC countries have become India's preeminent oil and gas supplier, leading trade partner, 8,000,000 Indians live and work there and send annual remittances of \$40 billion back home. The largest numbers of Indian passport holders abroad are in Saudi Arabia, a little over three million, and in the UAE, a little under three million, more than Pakistanis in both countries despite these two countries having a long standing particularly special relationship with Pakistan.

Significantly, the number of Indians living and working in GCC countries has continued to rise notwithstanding tightening of their policies to curtail the influx of expatriate manpower and despite the ongoing conflict in West Asia from February-March 2011 onwards. GCC countries are predominantly Muslim countries where internal security is now an even greater concern than earlier and therefore these facts represent an enormous vote of confidence in Indians and India. Furthermore, it is particularly noteworthy and gratifying that Saudi Arabia and the UAE have provided excellent and expanding anti-terrorism cooperation - the best that India has received from any country in the world - by repatriating people India wanted for terrorist activity within India despite intensive efforts by Pakistan to prevent such repatriations. It also merits mention that India is amongst very few countries in the world that simultaneously has excellent relations with Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Despite India having a Muslim community of 180 million, the third largest in the world, it is the world's least affected by dangerous radicalism emanating from West Asia.

The GCC countries and Iran are the only part of West Asia where some kind of a bloody conflict is not raging; as long as there are no internal conflicts within GCC countries it is unlikely that there will be any major substantive adverse impact for India beyond India having had to bring home about 40000 nationals cumulatively from Libya, Yemen and Iraq; 39 Indians remain in captivity of the Islamic State in Iraq.

Many in India's strategic community advocate India exercising a 'leadership role' in West Asia, without suggesting any specific actions to be taken. Such an approach would almost certainly be completely counter-productive and potentially even disastrous. The indisputable reality is that anything that India says or does will not even marginally influence the actions of any individual player or outcomes on the ground in the context of the highly complicated politico-military situation in West Asia. India does not have the institutional capacity and lacks national political consensus for the huge strategic leap that would be needed for such a role.

Policy should always be consciously tempered by a mature recognition of the limits of one's capabilities and influence at any given point of time. India has not faced any criticism from any of the countries of the region for its current policies in the context of the ongoing conflicts in the region. Given the proliferation of violent, irresponsible and irrational non state actors, India's becoming intrusively involved could provoke them to attack the very large Indian community in the region; India has to be very careful about potential blowbacks.

Reticence or so called policy passivity in a particularly unpredictably changing and volatile environment in war zones does not reflect an absence of decision making, an abdication of 'leadership', or of being a 'freeloader'. It is simply being sensibly prudent. India's non-intrusive, non-interventionist, non-judgmental, non-prescriptive, not taking sides in regional disputes, low key, low profile pragmatic approach based on mutual benefit and advantage has yielded very satisfying results and there is absolutely no need whatsoever to change the broad contours of this policy. This is the best way to preserve India's excellent relationships and protect its interests in the Gulf region in particular and West Asia in general.

Amb Ranjit Gupta, a member of Indian Foreign Service, has served extensively in the region .

Views expressed are author's own.

