

West Asia Watch

Trends & Analysis



**West Asia
Centre**



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EDITORIAL

West Asia Watch: Keeping an Eye on a Region in Flux

Being at the intersection of major continents and civilizations, West Asia holds a critical centrality in global geopolitical affairs. For quite some time, geostrategic upheavals emanating from the region have convulsed the world, unsettling various vectors of global peace and security. The West Asian region is witnessing a tectonic shift, new regional alliances are taking shape, the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry has intensified and major changes within Iran and Saudi Arabia are unfolding, and the crisis in Qatar remains unresolved. This situation has further been compounded with the humanitarian crisis in Syria and Yemen.

The challenge is particularly daunting for India, whose emergent status on the international stage remains contingent to peace and security in West Asia with which it has vital political, cultural, economic, energy and trade links. For India, stakes are particularly high in the Gulf region. In the Gulf Council Cooperation (GCC) countries alone, there are more than eight million Indians and thousands of Indian companies and businesses; the region is India's major trading partner and 65-70 percent of the energy requirements are met from this region. More importantly, with New Delhi's growing economic interests in the region it is looking at over a trillion dollars of sovereign wealth funds of the region to be invested in India. What is important to note is the growing interest of the region in India. Since 2015, the contours of India- West Asia relations have undergone a major transformation with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's active diplomatic, strategic and economic engagement.

It is in this context that the West Asia Centre of the IDSA is launching the first issue of this bimonthly newsletter – *West Asia Watch*. Its aim is to monitor and apprise the larger community of West Asia experts, scholars and Indian policy makers on the latest developments and their implications for India through its reports, interviews, and analysis. This is an attempt to offer an objective Indian viewpoint on the evolving situation in the region. At a time when India is seeking to evolve a new approach towards the region, it is important to keep a watch on political, economic and strategic developments in the region so as to help Indian policy makers to formulate a calibrated, smart strategy to protect its economic interests while augmenting its political and strategic engagement with the region. *West Asia Watch* is an attempt towards fulfilling this goal. We solicit your kind response to our new venture, as your feedback would prove vital for improving the newsletter, which seeks to create greater awareness and provide insights on geopolitical issues concerning West Asia.

In its current edition, the newsletter has sought to highlight some of the major developments unfolding in West Asia in the months of January and February 2018. The topics in this inaugural issue include India's outreach to the region spearheaded by the Prime Minister's

tour of four West Asian countries– Jordan, Palestine, the UAE and Oman, bracketed by the recent visits to India by Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in mid-January and Iran’s President Hasan Rouhani in mid-February, the spate of public protests that hit Iran around the New Year, and the disappointing finale of the Sochi summit held to resolve the Syrian crisis. This issue also carries an exclusive interview with the Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to India, Gholamreza Ansari and a guest column by former Indian Ambassador Talmiz Ahmed.

India's West Asia Outreach: High-Profile Diplomatic Dynamism

Meena Singh Roy and Adil Rasheed

India's diplomatic engagement with West Asia has gained fresh impetus in recent months. The evolving security situation in the region and India's growing economic and strategic engagement have led New Delhi to re-energise its relations with the West Asian region. A new 'Act West' dynamism has gathered momentum with high-profile visits taking place between heads of state, ministers and senior officials from India and major countries from the region. More than this apparent bonhomie in relations, there has been substantive improvement in political, economic, cultural, security and defence relations, with various countries of the region, with important deals and agreements being signed. This is commendable given the fine line Indian diplomacy has to tread, through an increasingly divisive and fractious extended neighbourhood.

Perhaps, the key to India's diplomatic success lies in its de-hyphenation of relations with countries locked in zero-sum rivalries and its focus on forging bilateral win-win relations with each country individually. By pursuing a highly balanced, non-partisan policy, India has to a great extent been able to protect and secure its growing stakes and vital interests in the region that range from energy, maritime trade, security and the safety of its 8 million-strong diaspora that sends back over \$40 billion in annual remittances.

Although India has been maintaining good relations with countries in the West Asian

region for a long time, some observers had earlier felt the need for a more proactive, high-profile engagement that could provide a new drive and direction to relations. With the coming of the Narendra Modi-led BJP government in 2014, India's relations with West Asia have clearly moved towards active diplomatic engagement with all the major players in the region, with the prime minister himself leading the initiative.

The Prime Minister's visit to the four countries in the region from February 9-13, 2018, is a clear example in this regard. This trip was bracketed between a six-day official visit by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to India in mid-January 2018 and the visit of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's visit to Hyderabad and Delhi in mid-February. India also hosted the King of Jordan when he visited Delhi in late February, while preparations are on for the upcoming visit of King Salman bin Abulaziz of Saudi Arabia to India.

In addition to the Prime Minister's tour of West Asia, two Indian ministers visited Saudi Arabia in February this year. External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj was the guest of honour at the Janadriya Festival held near Riyadh, while Finance Minister Arun Jaitley met the Saudi King to enhance relations between the two countries. This high-profile diplomatic engagement is a clear reflection of the growing desire on part of India and the region to not only upgrade and re-vitalise the

bilateral engagement but also look at building new strategic partnerships.

PM's visit to Jordan and Palestine: Ambivalence on East Jerusalem

One of the highlights of the recent high-level engagements, was Prime Minister Narendra Modi's historic visit to Palestine on February 9, 2018, the first ever by an Indian prime minister. It is noteworthy that he earlier became the first Indian prime minister to have visited Israel in July last year. In fact, the prime minister's visit was construed by some analysts as a balancing act on part of India, given the fact that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had just paid a six-day official visit to India in mid-January this year. However, the Indian government has assiduously emphasized that it de-hyphenates its relations with Israel and Palestine, as it builds and strengthens relations with each side independent of the other, and so the timing of the two events is coincidental.

In Palestine, Prime Minister Modi was accorded a grand welcome and was awarded the 'Grand Collar of the State of Palestine' medal by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Describing Mr Modi as a "great guest", President Abbas said that Palestine sought to use India's stature on the international stage to facilitate the peace process with Israel. In his response, Prime Minister Modi reiterated India's support for a "sovereign, independent Palestine living in a peaceful environment and called for a dialogue to find a permanent solution to the crisis, but stopped short of referring to the Palestinian state having borders based on 1967 guidelines, and East Jerusalem as its capital. According to some observers, [former President Pranab Mukherjee in 2015 and former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2013](#), had supported an independent and sovereign state of Palestine

within the 1967 framework with East Jerusalem as its capital. However, India remained ambivalent in its statement about the East Jerusalem issue during this visit.

This approach reflects New Delhi's new approach. While Prime Minister Modi was silent on the issue of the East Jerusalem, he confirmed India's continued commitment and support to the Palestinian cause which has always been on top of its foreign policy agenda. [Both countries signed agreements worth US \\$50 million](#), which covered the building of a high-class hospital worth US\$30 million in Beit Suhur, a centre for empowering women worth \$5million and setting up of a new National Printing Press at Ramallah at a cost of US\$ 5 million. As part of its new initiative, India is currently building a Technology Park and has been involved in capacity-building programmes. Thus, the focus of this visit was mainly on developmental cooperation between the two countries without getting involved in the current regional complexities.

On his way to Palestine, the Prime Minister had a quick stopover in Jordan (February 9), where in his own words he had a "wonderful meeting" with King Abdullah II. For his part, the King described the meeting as the beginning of a new chapter in India-Jordan bilateral relations. Following the meeting, the Prime Minister travelled in a Jordanian army helicopter to Ramallah from Amman, which was escorted by the helicopters of the Israeli Air Force that controls the airspace above West Bank. This visit needs to be viewed in the context of Jordan's increasing importance for India in the context of new geopolitical developments in the region. As the custodian of the Holy Mosque in Jerusalem, it occupies a central place within the Israel-Palestine issue. In addition, Oman has a unique geographical position, sharing borders with Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iraq.

Any development in its neighbouring countries is likely to have serious implications for Oman.

The visit of King Abdullah II to India on February 27, 2018 after Modi's short visit to Amman is reflective of Amman's growing significance for India and vice-a-versa. Both countries inked 12 agreements during King Abdullah's visit to India, providing a new impetus to bilateral relations, strengthening cooperation in the area of defence, counter-terrorism, cyber-security, health and medicine, Information Technology, education and training. Cultural ties and people-to-people cooperation were also given due attention to boost the overall [bilateral engagement between India and Jordan](#).

India-UAE Cooperation: Cementing a Strategic Partnership for the Future

After leaving Palestine, the Prime Minister visited the UAE on February 10, 2018, the only Indian leader to have visited the country twice during a term. This visit was a clear reflection of growing engagement between the two countries signified by the deep-rooted interest on part of the leadership of both countries to build a real strategic partnership for the future. The key areas of cooperation highlighted in the Joint Statement were mainly – combating extremism and countering terrorism, Security, Defence and Space, Trade, investment and civil aviation, Energy and climate change and boosting people-to-people and skill development cooperation.

During Mr Modi's meeting with the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohamed-bin Zayed-Al-Nahyan, the leaders reviewed the progress made in implementing the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement between the two sides as well as the outcome of the second ministerial-level

India-UAE Strategic Dialogue held in Abu Dhabi in October 2017. The two sides also signed five MoUs over energy, railways, manpower and financial sectors. Both India and the UAE underlined that as pluralistic societies, they are [“credible models against the tendencies of extremism and radicalism”](#). They discussed the institutional mechanism of the security dialogue set up at the respective levels of the National Security Adviser and National Security Council aimed at enhancing cooperation in counter-terrorism operations, intelligence-sharing and capacity-building. They also welcomed the finalization of an MOU on cooperation in the exchange of financial intelligence related to money laundering, associated predicate offences and terrorist financing.

The main highlight of the meeting was an agreement that awarded a consortium of Indian oil companies a 10 percent stake in offshore oil concession. This step transforms the traditional buyer-seller relationship between the two countries to a long-term investor relationship. The concession will last 40 years (2018 to 2057), with 60 percent of the interest being retained by the UAE oil company ADNOC, while the remaining 30 percent being awarded to international oil companies, which includes the Indian consortium.

Prime Minister Modi also delivered the [keynote address on the subject ‘Technology for Development’](#) at the Sixth World Government Summit in Dubai, where India was invited as the Guest of Honour. On the side lines of the World Government Summit, Prime Minister Modi met with a select group of senior GCC CEOs and business leaders.

A critical analysis of India-UAE ties reflects the following trends:

- a) Growing understanding between the two sides about each other's importance in the regional and global context.
- b) Recognition that both countries are multicultural and pluralistic societies committed to promoting the values of tolerance, peace and inclusiveness while acknowledging the critical role an inter-faith dialogue could play in countering extremist ideology.
- c) Both sides have expressed a strong desire to fight extremism and terrorism in all forms. Most importantly "they reiterated their condemnation for efforts, including by states, to use religion to justify, support and sponsor terrorism against other countries, [or to use terrorism as instrument of state policy.](#)" This statement clearly highlights the common position which the leadership of both countries shares on extremism and terrorism, making both sides partners in fighting this global menace.
- d) Deepening of cooperation between the two countries in security, defence and space has been a significant feature of overall fruitful engagement. In the past three years, cooperation in defence and security has been expanded. This got a further fillip during Modi's visit to UAE.
- e) A clear commitment by both sides to craft a long-term strategy to take trade and investment cooperation to greater heights. This includes cementing future trade ties through diversifying non-oil trade.
- f) Creating greater synergy to realise the investment of \$75 billion by UAE in India's infrastructure development. Likewise UAE welcomed growing interest from Indian IT and technology companies in investing in the UAE. The positive outcome of the fifth meeting of the UAE-India High-Level Task Force on Investment held in January 2018 in Abu Dhabi, highlights the efforts being initiated by both governments to accelerate the process of cooperation.
- g) Emerging strategic engagement in the Energy sector by transforming the buyer-seller relationship into long-term focus on investment and joint ventures in petrochemical complexes, and cooperation in joint exploration in India, UAE including in third countries. Both countries are also moving towards greater cooperation in areas of green Energy and climate change within the framework of the United Nations.
- h) Finally, the signing of the MoU on Manpower during Modi's visit ensures the continued commitment towards the well-being and welfare of Indians living in the UAE. This "would streamline the process of manpower sourcing, benefit Indian workers and UAE employers alike, and foster the exchange of information between the two countries" [as noted in the joint statement.](#)

In the past three years, India-UAE ties have taken a great leap forward in a big way. There is great potential in economic, security, defence and energy sectors for future cooperation between the two countries. To realise this potential, it is extremely important to sustain the current momentum of engagement initiated by the leaders of both the countries.

A Fillip to India-Oman Relations

Prime Minister Modi's last destination on his tour of West Asia was to the Sultanate of Oman on February 11-12, 2018. Oman is a strategic partner of India; its strategic location and neutral foreign policy makes it an important country in the region. Oman has good relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Prime Minister Modi's visit to Oman needs to be understood in the context of the strong ongoing defence and security cooperation between the two countries. The strategic aspect of this relationship got a further push during the visit. His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said personally received the Prime Minister at the Bait-al-Barakah Royal Palace and hosted a dinner in his honour. The two leaders expressed satisfaction at the ongoing bilateral security collaboration in the fields of counterterrorism, information-sharing and capacity-building.

Eight agreements were signed between India and Oman, covering areas like health, peaceful use of Outer Space, Tourism, civil and commercial matters and military, to give a fillip to bilateral cooperation. The key takeaway of the visit was the signing of a pact by the countries to extend dry docking and other facilities to Indian naval ships at Oman's Duqm Port. Access to Duqm could be viewed as part of New Delhi's maritime strategy to expand India's footprint in the Indian Ocean region. This access to the Omani port does significantly increase India's strategic positioning in the Indian Ocean. Media commentators view the move as a boost to India's strategy to counter Beijing in the Indian Ocean region. [However, it is noteworthy that China has already signed a deal in 2016 to invest \\$350 million in the Duqm Port Commercial Terminal and Operational Zone Development Project.](#)

During the visit, [the Indian Prime Minister urged Indian companies to invest in various sectors in the special economic zones of Oman](#), including SEZs in Duqm, Sohar and Salalah. He offered India's partnership and cooperation in areas of priority, such as minerals and mining, manufacturing, logistics, infrastructure, tourism, agriculture and fisheries, IT and IT-enabled services, skills development and innovation. There is a huge potential for cooperation between the two countries which still remains untapped. While a beginning has been made, the need is to provide a continuous push to further intensify this strategic partnership between India and Oman.

The deft diplomacy of Prime Minister Modi during his four-day tour of the region has undoubtedly given a new direction to India's West Asia policy, which has moved from "look west" to "think" and now, "link west". Such high diplomatic activism of the Modi government with the region does offer India good leverage with important regional actors, offering New Delhi enhanced options at a time when navigating through the conflict-ridden region has become highly challenging.

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Rouhani's Visit to India: Re-energising the Bilateral Partnership

Meena Singh Roy

India-Iran relations have come a long way after the “New Delhi Declaration” of January 2003. A new chapter in this strategic partnership was initiated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his visit in May 2016 when leadership of both the countries agreed to develop an all-out comprehensive strategic economic cooperation with focus on infrastructure development, trade, economic and energy cooperation and cementing the politico-strategic dimension of India-Iran relations. With an aim to give a further push and re-energise the ongoing engagement, President Hassan Rouhani paid a three-day visit to India from February 15-17, 2018.

President Rouhani's three-day visit to India needs to be analysed in the context of how much New Delhi and Tehran have been able to deliver on 12 agreements signed during PM Modi's visit to Tehran in 2016; what are the challenges and new opportunities opening up for both countries to take this partnership forward. Equally significant is to view this visit in the light of the changing regional situation, Iran's growing economic difficulties and finally, the Trump administration's constant threat calling for fixing the flaws or cancelling the JCPOA.

Looking at the positive side of the relationship, one can argue that there has been slow yet forward movement on some

issues after Modi's visit, mainly on infrastructure development, enhanced policy dialogue between the officials of two government, high-level visits from both sides, and growing attempts at addressing various roadblocks to boost trade and economic engagement. President Rouhani's visit reflects the continuity of the growing engagement between the two countries set out during PM Modi's visit in 2016. Both sides have reiterated their common determination to “further intensify and strengthen multifaceted bilateral cooperation” in [the joint statement](#). While nine agreements were signed during this visit in addition to four MoU's between the trade bodies on the sidelines of the visit, what clearly stood out was the heightened cooperation in the areas of connectivity, trade and investment.

Cementing the Partnership: Connectivity, Security, Trade and Investment Cooperation

The major highlight of the cooperation came in the form of signing of the lease contract for the Shahid Beheshti Port of Chabahar. The lease contract for interim period was signed between port and Maritime Organization (PMO), Iran and India Ports Global Limited (IPGL). India got the right to take over the operations of the Port for 18 months. Phase-I of the Port

was inaugurated in early December 2017 by President Rouhani, opening a new strategic route connecting India, Iran and Afghanistan, bypassing Pakistan. A consignment of 1.1 million tonnes of wheat from India was shipped to Afghanistan via this Port last year. This is a significant development, as Islamabad does not allow New Delhi to use its land route to reach Afghanistan. For providing assistance to the Afghan people and reach out to Central Asia, India will now be able to use Chabahar Port. It is important to note here that cooperation between Tehran and India on Chabahar has come as a surprise to some in Pakistan. From their point of view “It is remarkable that even after comprehensive strategic and defence pacts with Israel, India has still managed to gain the Iranians’ trust. While it is true that every country should have positive relation(s) with its neighbours, this economic cooperation between Delhi and Tehran is more than business as usual.”

To realise the full potential of the Chabahar Port, India has also conveyed its readiness to support the development of the Chabahar-Zahedan rail line. IRCON, India and CDTIC Tehran, are already engaged in discussions to finalise the technical parameters and working on financing options for this project in a time bound manner. Additionally, India has agreed to invest in setting up plants in sectors such as fertilizers, petrochemicals and metallurgy in the Chabahar Free Trade Zone (FTZ). Similarly, Iran has expressed its readiness to provide a better business environment to further attract Indian private/public sector investments in the Chabahar FTZ. With an aim of showcasing the economic

opportunities offered by the Chabahar Port, Iran will be organising a business promotion event, with participation of countries from the region and beyond.

The full operationalisation of the Shahid Beheshti Port will definitely convert Chabahar into a “Golden Gateway” of trade, commerce and connectivity not only to Afghanistan and Central Asia, but beyond. Both sides have reiterated their commitment to the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and stressed on the need for inclusion of Chabahar within its framework. To give a further push to this connectivity drive, Iran has agreed to hold an early meeting of the INSTC Coordination Meeting in Tehran. India’s accession to the International Road Transport (TIR). Convention and the Ashgabat Agreement has an added advantage, as this will help in enhancing regional connectivity and smooth linking of regional centres of economic growth. All these commitments, if implemented in the given timeframe, will definitely give a major push to the connectivity drive, enabling greater regional trade and economic engagement.

Trade and Investment Cooperation

The other significant takeaway from this visit was in the direction of trade and investment cooperation. While Iran has been an important source for India’s crude oil supplies, cooperation in trade and investment has been the unsatisfactory part of an otherwise strong political engagement. Iran’s share in India’s total

trade was just 1.95 percent during 2016-17. In fact, India's trade fell drastically in 2015-16 to US \$9,060 million from US \$15,278 million in 2013-14. [This has now gone up in 2016-17 to US \\$ 12, 886 million](#). To address various trade-related issues both sides agreed to put in place an effective network of banks for business transactions. The permission for opening a branch of the Iranian Pasargad Bank in India is under active consideration. Both sides have also agreed to set up a Joint Committee of officials to examine various options, including Rupee-Rial Arrangement, an Asian Clearing Union mechanism, to establish functional payment channels, which have been a major problem because of economic sanctions. To promote flow of investment and services, an agreement for the Avoidance of Double Taxation and the Prevention of Fiscal Evasion with respect to taxes on income was signed. In addition, both sides agreed to undertake negotiations on the Preferential Trade Agreement and the conclusion of the Bilateral Investment Treaty within a fixed timeframe. The regional office of the Confederation of the Indian Industry (CII) in Tehran has already begun functioning last year and the opening of Iran Chamber of Commerce and Industry in India is eagerly awaited. There is huge potential for cooperation between India and Iran in agriculture, Pharmaceuticals and railways , which can be intensified in future.

Building Comprehensive Bilateral Ties

The visit also saw the enhancement on security and defence cooperation, where

India and Iran agreed to enhance cooperation in the maritime sector including port calls by naval ships, training and regular exchanges of defence delegations. Combating terrorism has been one of the key areas of cooperation between India and Iran; [the joint statement](#) calls for combating “terrorism in all its forms and manifestations” while highlighting that “States that aid, abet and directly or indirectly support terrorism should be condemned”. A common position on Afghanistan was reiterated by both sides stressing the significance of strengthening India-Iran-Afghanistan trilateral consultations and coordination while committing their support for “[a strong, united, prosperous, pluralistic, democratic and independent Afghanistan](#)”.

Some new cooperative endeavours took shape as well between the two countries got highlighted during President Rohani's visit. These were mainly in the field of traditional systems of medicine, healthcare, medical education, research and training, agriculture and related sectors, and cooperation between two postal agencies. In addition, the ratification of Extradition Treaty brings into effect the agreement which both countries had signed in 2008. To facilitate the smooth travel of diplomats, both sides agreed on a waiver of visa requirements for diplomatic passports.

While energy forms a major component of India-Iran relations, no major breakthrough was seen during this visit. The much awaited deal on the Farzad B gas field only found mention in the joint statement, where both sides had agreed to move beyond the traditional buyer-seller

relationship, converting this into a long-term strategic partnership while looking forward to increasing the pace of negotiations on gas field. The ONGC Videsh Limited lead consortium has already invested over US\$ 80 million since it discovered this gas field 10 years ago. Therefore, forward movement on this project is extremely important for India.

President Rohani's visit can be termed as a significant step towards re-energising the strategic partnership between the two countries with an aim to build comprehensive bilateral ties.

Impediments for Cooperation

While development of the old cultural and civilizational connect between India and Iran are being transformed into pragmatic engagement based on new geo-economic and geo-political realities in the region, the flip side of this growing relationship does merit some attention. Without addressing the challenges it will not be possible to maintain the momentum initiated by Prime Minister Modi and President Rouhani to intensify and build a meaningful partnership. Some of these challenges are:

- (a) In the light of a divided Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and growing rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia getting reflected in the form of proxy wars in Yemen, Iraq and Syria, New Delhi will have to very carefully balance the conflicting interests without negatively impacting its relations with Iran and other Gulf states.
- (b) The future of JCPOA and the US-Iran relations particularly under the unpredictable Trump administration is

likely to have implications for India-Iran relations. The US' exit from the nuclear deal affects India's planned investments in Iran. India and Iran will have to find other ways of managing their economic and trade cooperation.

- (c) India's growing engagement with Israel after Modi's visit and Israel's extremely hostile position on Iran does pose a challenge for India to balance its relations with both the countries. So far, New Delhi has been able to manage this well. However, the changing regional geopolitical situation may bring about some difficulties.
- (d) Iran's stand on Kashmir particularly supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei's statement in his Eid-ul-Fitr address to support people in Kashmir and his February 5, 2018 address where he spoke about helping Palestinians and maintaining solidarity with Kashmir being among Muslims' key duties, raises serious questions.
- (e) The challenge for India is also to manage Iran's high expectations. Dealing with the complicated Iranian power structure in a nuanced manner would be an equally difficult task.

President Rouhani's visit has in many ways re-energised bilateral relations between New Delhi and Tehran, particularly in promoting regional connectivity projects like Chabahar and boosting cooperation in many new areas with an aim of enhancing engagement in Trade and investment. While a new beginning has been made by the top leadership in both the countries, it is important to sustain this momentum of

cooperation. The future of India-Iran relations will depend on how both the countries will be able to craft a smart

strategy to overcome various challenges while keeping a right balance towards each other's sensitivities.

Netanyahu's Visit: Matching Symbolism with Substance

Jatin Kumar

Reciprocating the gesture of friendship extended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi when he became the first Indian premier to visit Israel six months ago (July 4-6, 2017), Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu paid an extended visit to India (January 14-19, 2018) to commemorate 25 years of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

In Gujarat, the two premiers took part in an 8-km long roadshow from the Ahmedabad airport to Sabarmati Ashram and could be seen together flying kites on the Sabarmati riverfront.

Clearing the air

The visit comes in spite of differences in perception amongst the two countries over certain international issues. In fact, the Israeli premier's visit helped clear the air on certain apprehensions among political analysts over Indo-Israeli relations following India's recent vote at the UN General Assembly against the US decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital. The visit was also able to look beyond India's ties with Iran and its aversion to regime change in Syria. New Delhi has also reiterated [its commitment towards the Palestinian cause](#).

In spite of this divergence in foreign policy perspectives, there was an unmistakable

bonhomie in the way the two prime ministers met and worked toward strengthening Indo-Israeli relations. During the visit, both states proceeded to strengthen their bilateral partnership in agriculture, science and technology, and security domains. They exchanged views on increasing the number of centres of excellence, especially in the field of agriculture, by utilizing access to sophisticated Israeli practices and technology.

The two sides also sought to expand cooperation in less explored areas such as oil & gas, cyber security, films, and start-ups. They signed nine MoU and agreements on cyber security, space, oil and gas sector, investment, concentrated solar thermal technologies, air transport, film-co-production, homeopathic medicine and Ayurveda, metal-air batteries etc.

The Prime Minister welcomed Israeli companies to invest and [increase collaboration with Indian companies](#). Giving impetus to Indian innovation PMs Netanyahu and Modi dedicated iCreate, a centre established with the objective of easing entrepreneurship by combining "[creativity, innovation, engineering](#), product design and leveraging emerging technologies to deal with major issues such as food security, water, connectivity, cybersecurity etc." This initiative aims to

create an ecosystem in India to produce quality entrepreneurs. On January 15, 2018, Netanyahu attended the [2nd India-Israel CEO Forum Meeting in New Delhi](#) and launched the industrial R&D and Technology innovation fund (I4F), a \$40 million innovation fund to enhance the knowledge base of the Indian technology industry.

While delivering the keynote address at the Raisina Dialogue on January 16, 2018, Netanyahu highlighted the common security challenges and the need to strengthen the “India-Israel alliance”. The use of the term ‘alliance’ indicated their resolve for deepening engagement.

To strengthen cultural cooperation between the two countries, Netanyahu met with Bollywood personalities in Mumbai on January 18, 2018. The Israeli interest in Bollywood could serve as a fillip to India’s soft power influence in the region.

The two countries also agreed to open an Indian cultural centre in Israel to acquaint Israelis with Indian culture. Moreover, an agreement on annual exchange of [100 young people from science-related educational streams](#) was signed during this visit. The popularity of ‘Ayurveda’ in Israel has opened prospects for sharing knowledge and to this effect an MOU was signed for the first time during this visit.

During the visit, the media broadly highlighted the importance of Israel for India but India also has a lot to offer to Israel. For one, India is an influential power and a major player in international politics. Warm relations with India will potentially unlock the opportunities to

boost economic cooperation with other South Asian states especially those that do not enjoy “diplomatic relations with Israel, such as [Bangladesh, whose annual trade with India is about \\$6.6 billion](#)”.

While the visit has opened the doors for broader India-Israel cooperation, the biggest challenge for the both countries will be to take bilateral relations to a more advanced stage. Israel is evincing interest in elevating the bilateral relations to new heights, but to this end it may have to think out of the box. India is a big country, a democracy of 1.324 billion people. Therefore, Israel’s \$68.6 million investment is a drop in the ocean and there is immense scope for greater investment.

Israel offers technological solutions for India’s problems and India provides for it a huge market. If channelized in the right direction, both countries can gain from each other.

‘Final Step’ Towards Normalising Relations

Political observers dubbed the Israeli Prime Minister’s visit to India as the ‘final step’ in the process of fully normalizing relations with India. Many media commentators have commented that the visit was high on ‘optics’– on Netanyahu’s arrival to India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi turned up unexpectedly to greet him on the tarmac.

In addition to the roadshow and kite flying in Gujarat, the Israeli Prime Minister made the traditional trip to the Taj Mahal with his wife and also made a symbolic journey to Mumbai’s Chabad House, which

witnessed the 26/11 terror attacks and even claimed the lives of Israeli citizens. However, the symbolism was matched with a lot of substance too. This was reflected in the deliberations on a wide variety of

subjects ranging from agriculture to security cooperation.

(Jatin Kumar is Research Assistant at West Asia Centre in the IDSA)

Iran Protests: Causes and Consequences

Adil Rasheed

Around the turn of the New Year, Iran witnessed a groundswell of public discontent in the city of Mashhad that soon spread to over [40 other cities of the country](#), thereby becoming the most serious political threat for its regime since the [unsuccessful Green Movement of 2009](#).

The unrest began with some citizens protesting against rising food prices but the demonstrations snowballed as the grievances increased against several of the government's perceived economic and foreign policy failings; slogans were raised against the regime and even the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei.

The Iranian government's immediate response to the protests was conciliatory, even as it warned demonstrators against resorting to violence. In his speech on December 31, [President Rouhani said in a television address](#): "It should be clear to everyone that we are people of freedom. According to the constitution and citizens' rights, people are free to express their criticism and to protest ... However, we need to pay attention to the manner of that criticism and protest. It should be in such a way that it will lead to the improvement of the people and state".

Government Clampdown

Being spontaneous in nature, the public umbrage soon lost steam and the protests

petered out within two weeks. According to government figures, about 42,000 people took part in the protests across the country, out of which the government arrested about 3,700 people. It is claimed that at least [21 people died](#) as a result of the unrest. In addition to arrests, the government blocked access to the popular messaging application 'Telegram', which demonstrators used to share information and to organize rallies. Additional police as well as members of the dreaded Basij volunteer force helped to bring the situation under control.

Causes and Triggers

Among the many causes enumerated by international political analysts and media outlets for the outbreak of Iranian protests, there was the usual refrain of the regime's misrule, lack of political and social freedoms, and the general public frustration over pervasive corruption and economic mismanagement.

For its part, the Iranian government blamed foreign "enemies" for the unrest. The Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei himself was quoted by the state media ISNA as saying: ["Clues and intelligence evidence show that these events have been orchestrated](#) (by enemies), and a triple

party has been involved in bringing it about,”

According to Iran’s Tasnim News Agency, the Supreme Leader was referring “to the US and Israel as one side of the triangle that masterminded the plot and worked on it for months”, while “On the second side (sic) of the tripartite plot stood a [Persian Gulf wealthy state which financed the ploy](#)”.

However, the most plausible reason put forward for the outbreak of the protests at this time can be the dangers presently threatening the Iranian nuclear deal (the JCPOA) which Tehran sold to its people as a foreign policy breakthrough that would lead to the lifting of international sanctions, thereby allowing the country to sell its oil worldwide and rake in international investments to create jobs. With the coming of President Trump to power the deal appears to be in jeopardy. Iranian masses felt betrayed and desperate. Toiling under decades of debilitating economic sanctions, administrative failures and corruption, the simmering discontent boiled over. With oil prices predicted to be in secular decline and foreign companies hesitant to invest in Iran following the US’ bellicose rhetoric against the theocratic regime, the much needed investment in the country to create jobs and mitigate the pervasive unemployment [started appearing a false illusion](#).

International Response

In spite of the rhetoric coming from President Trump against the Iranian regime in the wake of the public unrest, the

response from the international community on the whole was cautious and restrained. “The world is watching!” President Trump tweeted, adding: [“Oppressive regimes cannot endure forever.”](#) For his part, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said: “I heard today Iran’s President [Hassan] Rouhani’s claim that Israel is behind the protests in Iran. [It’s not only false. It’s laughable.](#) And unlike Rouhani, I will not insult the Iranian people. They deserve better.”

On the other hand, French President Emmanuel Macron warned that the kind of comments emanating from the US and Israel were [“nearly one that would lead us to war”](#). British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson issued a lukewarm response and stated that his government: [“regret\[s\] the loss of life that has occurred in the protests in Iran”. It “believe\[s\] that there should be meaningful debate about the legitimate and important issues the protesters are raising”](#).

However, differences within the international community over the issue came out sharply when the UN Security Council held an emergency meeting about Iran on January 4, after the US asked it to show support for Iran’s anti-government protesters.

This line of instruction by the Trump administration apparently “backfired”, as most members of the UN Security Council used the session to [lecture the US ambassador](#) on the proper purpose of the body and to reaffirm support for the Iranian nuclear agreement.

Post-protest prospects

The significance of the Iranian protests has been a subject of debate among experts, with most calling the recent unrest more significant than the 2009 presidential election protests, when it is said the unrest was limited to only major cities and were held over charges of rigging. At that time, the protests were led by reformist parties against the conservative government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

However, the recent spate of protests was directed both against the so-called hardline and reformist factions of the regime and spurred by perceived political and economic 'mis-governance' of the country.

According to some reports, the protests have even [raised concerns among Tehran's regional allies](#), the so-called 'Resistance Axis', which include Lebanon's Hezbollah, Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Syria's Assad government. Many of the slogans raised in the protests were against

them too. It is believed that these forces might be concerned that the Iranian regime would now concentrate more on consolidating its power at home and might put its regional over-reach on hold for some time. The regime seems to be clearly in damage control mode as post-protests the parliament convened a special session and decided to reduce electricity and water tariffs, as an immediate sop to the people.

Some analysts view the protests are a prelude to more problems for the regime in the future and point to a possible power struggle over the legacy of the Supreme Leader.

[The fact that the protests were initially triggered by hardliners' posts on social media](#) and that former President Ahmedinejad was held by authorities for fomenting trouble points to a deepening malaise. Thus, the protests cannot be dismissed as another flash in the pan but may be better characterized as a miner's silent canary in the coal mines.

India's Rise Positive for Multilateralism, says Iranian Ambassador

Interview with Ambassador Gholamreza Ansari

In an exclusive interview to West Asia Watch, conducted by Dr Meena Singh Roy, Iran's Ambassador to India expressed his views on the geopolitical situation in West Asia, as well as the various facets of India-Iran relations.

1. How do you look at the recent developments in the region? What role do you see for Russia and China in the region?

At first it's important to define the position of West Asia in the international system. The region as a whole is important because of its geostrategic position and its abundant energy resources.

As the world becomes more multipolar, regional powers are getting more space to play a role. In another transition, West Asia is moving towards Asianization of its economy. Today, East Asia and India are the largest oil importers from the region. China's investments in the region have grown, as has its economic, diplomatic, and security footprint.

Given Russia's increasing footprint in West Asia, Moscow's strategy has been to stay close to all actors in the region. In the wake of Trump's policies, there is growing convergence between Russia and China in the region. Today, regional organizations led by China and Russia are strengthening and looking for new members.

On the other hand, the US posture has led to instability and rising oil prices in West Asia. Some analysts believe this is an opportunity for the United States as it has emerged as a new exporter of energy.

2. What is the future of the GCC?

This sub-region is experiencing various dynamics domestically and externally. Within this sub-region, we are witnessing resistance against Saudi hegemony. Indeed, the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council has faced a lack of coherence. The actors have ideological differences and highlighting of Iran as a threat is no longer effective. Therefore, the reason for the existence of this organization has been questioned. This sub-region needs a new arrangement that would engage all actors including Iran and Iraq.

3. Do you think that Da'esh has been defeated? How do you view this threat in the Indian subcontinent?

Although it was important that ISIS lost its territory, its ideology is still attractive for marginalized groups. The ISIS threat might continue to linger in the subcontinent, including in Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and Afghanistan. However, the main sanctuary for the ISIS would be in Afghanistan. In my opinion, the danger of extremism is something like a smouldering fire under the ashes in India, as some rejectionist attitudes towards minorities are strengthening extremism.

4. How do you assess the current status of India-Iran relations? How can these be strengthened?

The position of Iran in the foreign policy of India is based on geographical closeness, energy security and connectivity. In this context, one of the most important points of bilateral ties is the geographical closeness of the two countries. This geographic proximity can generate many opportunities for both sides, specifically in the arena of economic and trade relations. India and Iran enjoy potential connectivity assets in the region. In my opinion, if both sides try to set up their economic profile, the strategic dimension will follow soon.

5. What are the limitations of India- Iran relations?

From Iran's perspective, there are no limits. Iran is ready to expand its

relationship with India in all areas. However, to make this happen, both sides must try to translate their sentiments into reality.

6. What role do you think India and Iran can play in the region?

Today, the global order has become more polarized and complicated where uncertainty is one of its main elements. In this context, regional powers like Iran could be more active. Now, in a volatile Middle East, the role of Iran can be described as net security provider. From the perspective of Iran, the rise of India would be positive in the path of multilateralism. India always has been concerned about the stability of the region in terms of energy and Diasporas. In my view, on the stability of the region, the interest of both sides overlap.

7. What is the way ahead for India-Iran relations? What areas of cooperation can be taken up in the future?

The relationship between the two countries must go beyond the buyer-seller relationship. Connectivity and energy will continue to be the basis of the relations, but we need some drivers and incentives in many areas such as biotechnology, information technology, car manufacturing, railway and locomotive, mines and metals, people-to-people contacts and academic collaboration, etc.

8. How has Iran addressed the current internal unrest and what are the possible challenges for Iran in this context?

The reality is that some sections of the educated youth have economic grievances. They naturally have the right to express their demands which are reflected in Article 27 of the Constitution. The main challenge is that the economy's poor performance is rooted in structural issues. The problem is that economic structural reforms are unpopular among the public despite the fact that in the long term these structural reforms will bring about benefits to all people. Protesters have been critical of structural reforms in the country's budget for the next year. They were carrying out their peaceful protests in Mashhad, until the protests turned violent and spread to different cities. It was becoming clear that these protests were being coordinated by West-backed groups

based in Europe and the United States. Meanwhile, the protests were also highlighted by Western media. Therefore, the main challenge would be providing subsidies. Despite the recent unrest, Rouhani's administration is determined to put structural reforms on the agenda.

9 How do you think India-Iran relations can be further strengthened? What are the new important areas of cooperation?

We need a regional initiative to strengthen India -Iran ties. One of the main themes of President Rouhani's visit, might be to engage third countries, especially with regards to Chabahar Port and the INSTC corridor. We need a road map for energy and connectivity cooperation. This is important because intentions must be translated into reality.

GUEST COLUMN

Sochi Summit: Implications for Syrian Peace

Talmiz Ahmad

On January 29-30, 2018, Russia, in partnership with Iran and Turkey, hosted the Congress of Syrian National Dialogue at the Black Sea resort of Sochi. This event was the culmination of a year-long effort by Russia and its allies to promote a peace process in Syria that would end seven years of war and give the beleaguered nation the possibility of national reconciliation and the reconstruction of the devastated national infrastructure. About 1600 Syrians representing different factions attended the event to discuss how their country could be healed.

Every aspect of this endeavour was marked by controversy, reflecting the deep divide between the government in Damascus and the opposition, as also ideological and political divisions among the numerous opposition groups and the interests of the regional countries backing them.

Run-up to the Conference

Some major opposition groups refused to attend. These included the Higher Negotiation Council (HNC), based in Riyadh, though some members of this coalition did appear at Sochi. Critics of the HNC have also noted that since HNC leaders had met the Russian foreign minister in Moscow a few days before the

Sochi conference, their “boycott” of Sochi was quite meaningless.

Turkey opposed the participation of the Syrian Kurds, represented by their party, the Democratic Union Party and their militia, the People’s Protection Units (PYD). Again, the Ankara-based opposition members from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) did land at Sochi airport, but refused to leave the airport for the conference after they saw the Syrian flag at the airport which is associated with the Al Assad regime, rather than the older flag. Turkey represented its protégés at the conference.

Western countries, led by the US, opposed the conference on the ground that the principal platform for the peace process should be Geneva, with the discussions taking place under UN auspices. Other commentators have noted that nine futile rounds of talks have taken place at Geneva, without any progress. The Syrian government had refused to attend since removal of the president, Bashar al Assad was the first item on its agenda.

In the event, the UN special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, attended the Sochi conference. [Neil Hauer, a sharp critic of the Russian initiative, accepts that the Geneva process is “moribund, obsolete, and incapable of producing anything of note”.](#)

Supporters of the Russia-led process point out that Geneva has been overtaken by new realities on the ground, in that, with Russian military help from September 2015, Assad is now firmly established on the saddle in Syria and being backed by Iran, the Hezbollah and Russia, there is no force, domestic or regional, that can threaten his authority. However, to placate critics, Russia has repeatedly affirmed that its peace process merely supplements Geneva, does not replace it.

Critics of the event have also pointed out that the attendees were generally pro-Assad and pro-Russia and did not reflect the real opposition. However, during the remarks made by Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov at the inauguration, the minister was heckled by a critic in the audience who accused Russia of war-crimes, but he was shouted down by pro-Russia members.

Outcome of the Conference

Supporters of the conference applauded the fact that it took place at all and for the first time in seven years, a large number of Syrians sat together under the same roof to discuss their country's future. Even the Saudi commentator, Abdulrehman Al Rashed, while criticising Syrian and Russian attempts to pressurise delegates into "surrender", said, the importance of Sochi could not be ignored, particularly the prospect of peace in Syria that the event offered.

Given the brutal seven-year conflict, the delegates at Sochi were conscious of the numerous challenges their country faces: providing humanitarian support to the

millions who have been displaced; dealing with the numerous militia, including extremist elements; re-building the national army and security forces on non-sectarian basis, and above all, taking up national reconstruction.

In the event, they prioritised constitutional matters: it was agreed at Sochi that a 150-member committee, made up of government and opposition members, would be set up to prepare a Constitution that would decide on the country's form of government, national elections and its federal structure.

While initially the Syrian government welcomed this outcome, two weeks later its spokesperson rejected the re-writing of the constitution, saying: "We are not bound by anything that is formed by foreign sides, whatever their name or state." This tough posture perhaps reflects Assad's concern that the new Constitution could raise questions about his status as also his confidence that his allies, Iran and Russia, will not countenance his departure.

Though Sochi took place in difficult circumstances and its results were relatively modest, the important point was that the peace process remains in place with an acceptable discussion platform that could over time bring in other participants who are now on the fence and with Russian commitment, evolve into a forum to build consensus on national issues.

Challenges for the Peace Process

Obviously, there are serious challenges before the peace process. These principally

emerge from differing priorities among the partner-countries sponsoring the process and the uncertainty relating to the US intentions in Syria. While Russia prioritises the peace process to consolidate its strategic role in Syria and the region, Iran's principal interest is to retain Assad in power and to establish itself and its ally Hezbollah on permanent military bases in Syria.

Turkey's main concern relates to the expanding territorial influence of the Kurds, who are shaping their Rojava western homeland at the Turkey-Syria border and have a formidable, battle-hardened militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG) to support their aspirations for autonomy, if not full independence. Turkey views the Syrian Kurds as close affiliates of its own dissident Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the prospective Rojava as an existential threat since it would provide the PKK with strategic depth, training facilities and sanctuary.

The three partners in the Syrian peace process now see a new threat emerging from the US decision to maintain a permanent presence in Syria in the territories under Kurdish control.

In a speech on January 17, 2018, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson announced that US forces would remain in Syria even after the ISIS had been defeated. The new US agenda would include: preventing the return of ISIS; removal of Assad; rolling back Iranian influence, and stabilising Syria. To achieve these aims, Tillerson said the US would train a 30,000-strong "border force" that would consist of elements from the Syrian Democratic

Forces (SDF) that are largely Kurdish; these forces would be supported by a 2000-strong US military contingent.

While Iran and Russia see in this plan a challenge to their influence in Syria and the region in general, Turkey views this plan as an immediate threat. It then decided to pre-empt the US agenda by sending its troops into Syria on January 20, to capture the town of Afrin and disrupt the contiguity of the Kurdish homeland.

A month later, Afrin was surrounded by Turkish forces, amidst great national fervour at home and threats from President Erdogan that his troops could march to Manbij, about 100 km from Afrin, and clear it of Kurdish forces. Since Manbij has US soldiers, Erdogan has held out the possibility of a direct conflict between these two NATO partners.

The US initiative has little credibility. It seeks not only to overturn the Obama's hands-off policy relating to Syria but also attempts to challenge the entrenched presence of Russia and Iran in Syria with a paltry force of 2000.

What is alarming is that the presence of these troops will aggravate regional tensions by emboldening both the Kurds and Israel to initiate provocative attacks on Syrian and Iranian assets and thus set the stage for a region-wide conflict. It will certainly not promote stability either in Syria or the region.

(The author, a former diplomat, holds the Ram Sathu Chair for International Studies, Symbiosis International University, Pune.)

WEST ASIA NEWS SURVEY

POLITICAL

1. Turkish row with Egypt and Greece

ANKARA (12 February): Cyprus has alleged that [Turkish warships continue to block an Italian offshore rig](#) from arriving at a site, where an Italian energy company is scheduled to drill for gas. Turkey has a longstanding dispute with the Cyprus government over issues related to the country's partition and its drilling efforts, which do not acknowledge concerns of Turkish Cypriots.

In addition, Egypt and Turkey are squabbling over the 2013 Egypt-Cyprus agreement to jointly develop offshore oil and gas deposits. According to Turkey, the treaty violates their continental shelf. — Arab News

2. Netanyahu faces graft charges

TEL AVIV (14 February): Israeli Police has filed corruption charges against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for being involved in two corruption cases of bribery and breach of trust. According to reports, he is alleged to have received thousands of dollars worth of gifts from Arnon Milchan and James Packer. In the first case, called 'Case 1000', Netanyahu and his wife are accused of receiving

expensive gifts from high profile people. While in the second case, known as 'Case 2000', he is indicted for making an illegitimate deal with *Yedioth Ahronoth* newspaper publisher, Arnon Mozes. [The corruption case has brought embarrassment for the office of the Prime Minister](#) and has put the government in a critical situation, as opposition parties are asking for his resignation. — *Newsweek*

3. Jordan govt survives no-confidence vote

AMMAN (18 February): Jordanian parliamentarians have rejected a no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Hani Al-Mulki's government over recent tax decisions. According to Kuwait News Agency (KUNA), ["the motion was opposed by 67 MPs, and 49 in favour, while four abstained out of 122 MPs"](#) To pass the no-confidence motion against the government, a minimum 66 deputies should have approved the motion out of the 130 parliamentary members. Recently, Jordan has taken a couple of economic decisions, which impose new taxes on commodities and services. — Kuwait News Agency

4. Jordan not to extradite Saddam's daughter

TEHRAN (14 February): Jordan has rejected the Iraqi government's request to extradite the eldest daughter of

Saddam Hussein, Raghda Saddam Hussein. The Arabic-language *al-Ray al-Youm* newspaper quoted a Jordanian official as saying that Amman has ignored Baghdad's demand for Raghda's extradition for humanitarian reasons, noting that she is in Jordan as a guest and is not active in the political arena. In July 2003, Raghda escaped to Jordan with her sister, Rana and her children. Since 2006, Raghda has been listed as most wanted by the Iraqi government. The issue flared up [Razzaq al-Haidari \(Iraqi Member of Parliament\) threatened Jordan with consequences if it refuses to extradite Raghda.](#) — Farsnews

5. Qatari royal claims UAE 'held' him

ABU DHABI (15 January): Sheikh Abdullah bin Ali Al Thani, a royal Qatari family member who was exiled to UAE during the Qatar crisis, has accused UAE of holding him against his will. The Qatari royal had emerged as a key figure in the dispute between the Gulf States in the weeks after Riyadh and Abu Dhabi severed their relations with Doha.

A video released online shows the Qatari royal seated in an armchair, warning that he was ["afraid something could happen to me that will be blamed on Qatar"](#). His claim was promptly condemned by Saudi Arabia and denied by the UAE which further accused Qatar of conspiring against late Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz. Similarly, Qatar's accusation of violation of its airspace by Emirati military aircraft was denied by the UAE minister of foreign

affairs and the UAE lodged a complaint with United Nations regarding Qatari warplanes intercepting Emirati civilian aircraft. — Al Jazeera

6. Protests break out in Tunisia

TUNIS (12 January): A fresh wave of protests have erupted in Tunisia in the wake of the seventh anniversary of the Arab Spring unrest. The protests were sparked in response to government's decision to increase taxes under [the 2018 finance law](#), which came into effect from January 1. The new law has raised taxes on gasoline, housing, internet usage, phone cards and food items such as fruits and vegetables.

Political observers aver that the protests are the result of government's austerity measures and increasing unemployment. The protesters demanded 'isqaat an-nizaam', the downfall of the regime. According to reports, the state security forces arrested more than 500 people, while a death has been attributed to the crackdown. — Al Jazeera

7. China's visa-free travel to UAE citizens

ABU DHABI (16 January): China has introduced [pre-entry visa free travel for UAE citizens](#) for a maximum of 30 days preceded by inauguration of the first ever Chinese Visa Application Service Centre in September 2017 so as to encourage tourism, bilateral investment and trade. The UAE airline companies operate 60 regular flights to China weekly, reflecting growing economic and trade cooperation.

China extends visa free entry for maximum 15 days to citizens of Singapore, Brunei and Japan as well. The citizens of UAE enjoy visa free entry in 138 countries. — GDN online, Gulf Business

8. Turkey detains 300 online detractors

ANKARA (29 January): The Turkish government has detained at least 300 people for criticizing its invasion of Afrin online. President Erdogan has dubbed the Turkish Medical Association (TTB) as [‘filth’ and ‘terrorist lovers’ over an anti-war message](#).

Turkish interior ministry has further stated that it has opened an investigation against the [actions of the TTB and Pervin Buldan, co-leader of the largely Kurdish People’s Democratic Party](#). Meanwhile, Turkish government continues to imprison Taner Kilic, the head of the Turkish branch of Amnesty International. A Turkish court ordered his release on February 1, but a second court has reversed that ruling. Kilic is charged with membership of a terrorist organization. — BBC, Reuters

9. Iranian police arrest hijab violators

TEHRAN (23 February): Iran’s police has arrested several [women protesters who are violating the compulsory Hijab rules by taking off their scarves in public](#) and holding them up on sticks. Iranian police said they arrested 29 women in early February for removing their head scarves in public. The so-called Girls of Revolutionary Street started their

protests on December 27, giving rise to a strong debate in the country on women’s rights and religious restrictions since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

According to human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh, [“The message is very clear and specific that women want to be able to choose if they wear hijab or not”](#). Iran’s prosecutor general, Mohammad Jafar Montazeri, described the protests as “childish”, “emotionally charged” and instigated “from outside the country”. — *The Guardian*, Radio Free Europe

10. Stick to nuclear deal: Iran tells West

TEHRAN (8 February): Iran has said that the West should ensure the Iranian nuclear deal succeeds before trying to negotiate other issues. At a Paris conference, Iran’s deputy foreign minister Abbas Araqchi told US and European officials that they should first [“make the \(deal\) a successful experience and then we discuss other issues”](#).

Meanwhile, Reuters is said to have laid its hands on a [State Department cable that indicates that the US has sketched out a common ground with France, Germany and the UK on the Iranian deal](#). The cable reportedly reveals that the Trump administration wants a commitment from the European allies to work together to seek a supplemental agreement, addressing Iran’s nuclear development and testing long-range missiles which would also endure stringent IAEA inspection. In the absence of such a commitment, the US

says it will not lift sanctions on Iran. — Reuters

11. Iran imposes cyber crackdown

TEHRAN (29 February): According to state media reports, Iran is seeking to develop cyber capabilities for a more controllable Internet in response to the rising internal dissent against the regime and for conducting cyberwarfare against the US and Israel. [The aim is to set up its own “halal” \(permissible\) Internet that allows the government to censor what users may like to search for or post.](#) The idea of setting up the country’s own Internet arose in 2011 in the wake of 2009 protest giving rise to the National Information Network. Recent protests in Iran have driven the government to curb the flow of information by blocking access to thousands of websites, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and some news outlets. — Rudaw, AP

12. Kurdish PUK, KDP face graft charges

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region, Iraq (12 February): Protests have erupted in the Iraqi Kurdistan region calling for reforms to combat rising corruption that some observers believe [could spell disaster for the two major political parties](#), the Barzani-run Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

After governing oil-rich Iraqi Kurdistan for 26 years, the region’s two major political parties are on the verge of political and economic bankruptcy. [While members belonging to the KDP](#)

[and PUK live comfortable lives, majority of civilians have not been receiving their salaries, which had previously reduced.](#)

This has led to unprecedented level of poverty and resentment against the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). On 11 February, a senior Peshmerga commander threatened to seize an oil tanker if their soldiers did not receive salaries. Both PUK and KDP have lost two important resources that enabled them to gain popular support: a sizeable share of Iraqi national revenues and control over Kirkuk’s oil field. — Rudaw, AINA

13. Quartet opposes UN on Qatar

RIYADH (31 January): The quartet of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE and [Egypt have condemned the UN Commission Report on Qatar boycott](#) which mentioned that the quartet took unilateral, coercive and arbitrary measures which permanently scarred the social fabric of the region.

The four countries issued a statement saying that the report is based on [limited understanding of the situation and the basis of this boycott goes back to Qatar’s support for terrorism and each member of the quartet has sovereign right to protect and defend their national security.](#)

The quartet also affirmed their reservation about manner and timing of leaking of the report by the Qatar National Human Rights Commission in a conference held on 8 January, 2018. — Arab News, Al Jazeera

14. Saudi, Pak parliamentary meet

RIYADH (22 February): Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have vowed to strengthen their bilateral relations and committed for exchange of parliamentary delegations at the [Saudi-Pakistan Parliamentary Friendship Committee meet at the Shoura council](#).

The meeting was attended by Pakistan's Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Khan Hasham Bin Saddique and was led by the Committee's chairman Dr. Abdullah H. Al-Harby.

Apart from trade, investment, education and cultural affairs, the need for enhancing people-to-people contact and bilateral ties was felt by both the sides.

Saudi Arabia expressed gratitude towards the Pakistani workers who contributed in the kingdom's development. – *Saudi Gazette*

15. Philippines-Kuwait row over workers

KUWAIT CITY (13 February): Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte announced a ban on nationals working in Kuwait following the death of a Filipino worker Joanna Daniela Demafel is which sparked widespread anger. Her body was found in a freezer with injury marks.

Philippines also started repatriation of more than 10,000 workers, most of whom fall under amnesty of the Kuwaiti government. There are 250,000 official workers and reportedly 50,000

undocumented Filipino workers currently in Kuwait.

The President said [“The Filipino is no slave to anyone, anywhere. Every unlawful physical injury that is inflicted is an injury I personally bear as the head of this republic.”](#) The news of the death of Demafelis came a day after Duterte's visit to Kuwait, when an agreement to provide legal protection to Filipino workers was to be signed. Philippines is looking at China and Russia as new markets for overseas workers. Meanwhile, Kuwait's Foreign Minister has condemned the Manila ban on workers. – *Arab News*

SECURITY

16. Syria shoots down Israeli F-16

BETHLEHEM (10 February): Israel has confirmed the [downing of its F-16 fighter jet deep inside Syrian territory](#). [Israeli Defence Forces \(IDF\)](#) noted that they had earlier intercepted an Iranian drone in Israeli territory, and during its retaliatory air strike on Iranian targets in Syria, anti-aircraft missiles hit an Israeli F-16. The plane eventually crashed inside Israel's border and both its pilots ejected and were taken to hospital. The Syrian areas of Golan Heights registered intense fighting between the Syrian army and rebels. – *Haaretz*, Palestinian News Network

17. After ISIS black flags, its 'White Banners'

BAGHDAD (11 February): Iraq is preparing for a military campaign to secure routes through the Hamrin mountain range in northeast Iraq to transport crude oil from Kirkuk to Iranian refineries. It is believed that ISIS units might still lurk in the area or marauders from a new [group called 'White Banners'](#) This new group is said to comprise Kurdish fighters who have fallen out with the Kurdistan Regional Government and have the potential of threatening the transit route. There are also reports that a new Iraq-Iran pipeline will soon be constructed to export oil from Kirkuk, replacing another that heads to Turkey through the areas controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government. – Middle East Online

18. Israeli planes hit Gaza

TEL AVIV (19 February): Israeli fighter planes reportedly targeted areas of the Gaza Strip after Palestinians fired a rocket, striking southern Israel. In [a statement, Israeli Army](#) said that “fighter jets targeted underground infrastructure in the southern Gaza Strip, in response to a projectile that was launched at Israel earlier”. Though the Palestinian Security forces did not give details about the targets, sources claimed [numerous missiles were fired at farmland east of Rafah.](#) According to IDF, Israeli aircrafts hit 18 Hamas “facilities in two waves of air strikes”.

These raids were launched in retaliation to an explosion which injured four Israeli soldiers scrutinizing the border fence on 17 February 2018. The exchange of fire was marked as the most serious escalation in areas ruled by Hamas since the 2014 war. – *The Daily Mail*

19. Israeli wall violates sovereignty: Lebanon

BEIRUT (6 February): Lebanon has complained against a proposed wall that Israel intends to construct along their shared border during a meeting chaired by UN peacekeepers. [Beirut claims that the proposed wall would pass through their territory](#), although it is wrongly located on the Israeli side of the UN marked 'blue line', drawn to demarcate the borders after Israeli troop withdrawal from South Lebanon in 2000. On the other hand, Israel claims to be building the wall entirely on their soil. According to a statement released by Lebanese President Michel Aoun, a meeting was held with Prime Minister Saad Al-Hariri, and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri who pledged to work together to counter the “Israeli threat”.

In order to mediate the recent dispute between Israel and Lebanon, the US sent acting Assistant Secretary of State David Satterfield and later Secretary of State Rex Tillerson himself. However, the Lebanese speaker told Scatterfield that the US proposal of compromise was “unacceptable”. Meanwhile, Hezbollah’s Secretary-General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah has said [the US is not an honest broker, because it defends Israeli rights and issues threats against](#)

[Lebanese politicians](#). — *The Jerusalem Post*, Ynetnews

20. Israel, Lebanon offshore energy row

BEIRUT/TEL AVIV (17 February): Lebanon and Israel have entered a spat over offshore energy reserves. The tension emerged when Lebanon signed an oil and gas drilling contract in the Mediterranean Sea region with a consortium containing, Total, ENI and Novatek, [in a disputed 'Block 9'](#). It is one among the ten blocks off Lebanon that constitute its exclusive economic zone.

The Lebanese act was described as “very provocative” by Israel, as it claims that the territory belongs to Israel by any definition. In response to Israeli remarks, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah noted on February 16, that Lebanon is strong enough to give Israel a befitting reply. [The Israeli decision to construct a wall along the border also heightened the problem](#). — *Israel National News*

21. Militants kill 20 in Tripoli

TRIPOLI, Libya (16 January): A militant outfit stormed the Libyan capital Tripoli's Mitiga International Airport on Monday with automatic weapons, leaving 20 dead and about 60 injured. The attack was a failed attempt to free militants from a nearby prison. Mitiga is a military base situated in Tripoli that started hosting civilian flights after the international airport was put out of service in 2014. It is close to a prison that holds around 2,500 prisoners, including Islamic State suspects. The

attack challenged the claims of the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) that it has largely stabilized the city. — Reuters

22. Saudi, UAE differences over Yemen

ADEN (17 January): Recent conflict in Aden has reportedly created a wedge in the Saudi-UAE alliance as the Kingdom supports the Yemeni government, while Emiratis are reportedly backing southern separatist groups.

In fact, [internationally recognized Yemeni leader, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi in an audio recording from Riyadh has said that the UAE is behind the clash](#) and is plotting another coup in the southern port city to pursue its own interest in Yemen.

Reports claim that UAE is backing the separatists to gain control of major cities and military bases. — Reuters, Press TV

23. Yemen troops and Al-Qaeda clash

ADEN (30 January): Reports claim [that at least 10 people were killed in a suicide attack in the military checkpoint of Shabwa province](#) on January 27. The attacks which targeted separatist forces, bore the hallmark of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). It appears that the AQAP prefers the Hadi government over secessionists, who are explicitly secular and closely associated with the UAE.

On February 18, 2018, Yemeni forces claimed to have killed 27 suspected Al-Qaeda members in Hadhramaut

province, which was held by AQAP since April 2015 through April 2016. They also claimed to have re-captured Misini Valley which had been an AQAP stronghold. — *Middle East Eye*, Yemen Media Info.

24. Pakistan to send troops to Saudi Arabia

RIYADH (20 February): Pakistan has [decided to accept Saudi request to send troops to the Kingdom](#), under the ambit of bilateral security cooperation. Saudi Ambassador to Pakistan Nawaf Saeed Al-Maliki said that about a thousand Pakistani troops have been sent to Saudi Arabia and [they will not be deployed outside the border](#). Pakistani lawmakers have strongly condemned this decision as it is contrary to the parliamentary resolution passed in 2015, affirming neutrality in Yemeni conflict. — ABN News Agency, *Asia Times*, *Daily Times*

25. Russia warns Israel, Iran

MOSCOW (11 February): Russia has called for [restraint among all actors involved in recent escalation between Israel and Syria](#). It has also cautioned them against carrying out any attack on Russian forces present in Syria.

On February 12, Putin ordered Israel to halt military strikes on Iranian outposts in Syria after an Israeli warplane was shot down in the region. At the time when Israel completed its second round of bombardment against Syrian forces in retaliation to the loss of its jets, the Russian President told Netanyahu over phone “to avoid a course of action that

could have dangerous consequences for the region”.

Although Netanyahu acknowledged Putin’s call he made no mention of further bombardments. On the other hand, Qassem Soleimani, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps general who was tasked to oversee Iran’s military activity in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, threatened to “wipe out Israel”, due to which Russia reprimanded Iranian officials and stated that [“it is absolutely wrong way to advance one’s own interests”](#). — *The Jerusalem Post*, *Times of Israel*

26. 400 die in attack on US forces in Syria

NEW YORK (7 February): About 400 Russians and Syrians have been killed, yet no one knows who ordered them to attack US forces in Syria. [US officials claim that they are still unsure who directed the attack on US-backed forces in Syria](#).

A Russian military officer claims that it was not involved in the attack. Although Pentagon has declined to illustrate the nature of the attacking force, the *New York Post* claim that the attack on US’ force [could not have happened without Russian President’s personal approval](#). The author of the report is a retired US Army officer who says that “the core of the attacking force came from the Wagner Group, Russia’s version of the American thugs who worked for the company formerly known as Blackwater”. — *Middle East Monitor*, *New York Post*

27. US training Iraqi pilots

NEW YORK (14 February): The United States Air Force is gradually reducing its air support mission in Iraq and spending more resources on training Iraqi pilots. [The coalition will now focus more on policing, border control and capacity building.](#)

On the other hand, the United States seeks to establish a larger training mission in Iraq to ensure militants don't emerge again. But it appears that NATO is wary of taking another open-ended commitment like Afghanistan and at present it is already struggling with training of Libya's UN backed government in Tripoli.

Speaking of air support, [Iraq has requested Russia to provide arms of local producers and S-400 missile system despite its budget deficit of 1\\$ billion in air force funding.](#) — Reuters, *Iraq News*

28. Qatar to buy Russia's S-400 systems

MOSCOW (25 January): Following the defence deal signed with Russia, Qatar [is in talks to buy S-400 air defence missile systems.](#) The military and technical cooperation deal was signed when Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu visited Qatar last October, after Saudi Arabia finalized the purchase of S-400 from Russia.

The Qatari ambassador to Russia Fahad bin Mohammed Al-Attayah mentioned that the talks have reached an advanced stage. Qatar-Russia cooperation includes

supplies of military hardware and equipment, military training of officers and soldiers and cooperation at the level of special services.

[Qatar's commitment to buy Russia's S-400 systems is significant](#) after its isolation by the quartet of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt last year, accusing it of sponsoring terrorism. After the Qatar crisis, Russia has strengthened its foothold in the region. — *Arab News, The Defence Post*

ECONOMIC

29. Saudi \$1.5b for Iraq reconstruction

KUWAIT CITY (14 February): At a conference held at Kuwait, Saudi Arabia [allocated \\$1.5 billion for Iraq reconstruction and trade of which \\$1 billion was loaned through Saudi Fund for Development](#) and \$500 million is export credit.

The sum of \$30 billion was pledged for Iraq's reconstruction, including pledges by Kuwait (\$2bn), Turkey (\$5bn), Qatar (\$1bn), UAE (\$500m), Germany (\$350m), Britain (\$1bn), Japan (\$100m) and USA (\$3bn). The amount pledged is short of the required amount, as it is estimated that Iraq needs \$88bn for reconstructing areas hit by Daesh's occupation and the fight to defeat them. Mosul and Ramadi have suffered the worst destruction and \$17b is needed to re-build homes. The UN estimates that there are 40,000 homes to be rebuilt in the Iraqi city of Mosul alone. When

Lebanese President Michael Aoun visited Iraq, he expressed his country's desire to be engaged in reconstruction activities. — *Arab News*

30. Iran parliament okays Rouhani budget

TEHRAN (22 February): After previously rejecting it, [Iranian parliament approved the outlines of President Hassan Rouhani's proposed budget bill](#) for the next year. Rouhani's budget reflects economic concerns raised by protestors in late December. The government looks to drastically scale back cash transfer and 50 percent hike in the price of fuel. According to a new Iranian poll, 68.9 percent of Iranians are not happy about the state of their economy, an increase from 63.4 percent in June last year. — Radio Farda, Reuters

31. Iran-Oman gas pipeline

TEHRAN (7 February): The Oman gas pipeline deal signed in 2014 by Iran and originally slated for a 2018 start-up, [looks unlikely to get moving anytime soon](#). The CEO of the National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC) says that Iran is ready to start the onshore portion of the pipeline project, to run 200 km from the IGAT-7 pipeline to Kuh Mobarak where that gas will then be piped underwater to Oman's LNG export facility to Sohar. He further states that ["The \\$1.2bn project would enable Iran to increase gas exports and Oman to liquefy and resell the gas at higher prices. Oman could import up to 20bcm/year under the 15year deal."](#) — Reuters, NIGC

32. Iraq oil drilling hits new high

BAGHDAD (8 February): The ongoing drilling by UAE [at Halfaya phase-II in southern Iraq will hit double capacity to 400,000 b/d](#). The Chinese state firm CNPC is the operator with 45 percent stake, along with the [French company Total having 22.5% stake, as does Malaysian state firm Petronas](#). The drilling has helped raise the Iraqi oil rig count to the highest level this year since 2015, according to monthly figures produced by Baker Hughes, the oil services arm of US conglomerate, GE.

The other ongoing work includes expansion of Majnoon capacity by 200,000 b/d, to hit 420,000 b/d by 2020 (though operator Shell is in the process of quitting the field). In addition, Iraq seeks to reboot the Northern Oil sector to restore its glory by increasing its current output from 148,000 b/d to 1.5mn b/d. — MEES.

33. Iraqi PM calls for international aid

BAGHDAD (14 February): Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al Abadi called on foreign investors on January 25, to help [Iraq in rebuild war-torn cities after defeating Islamic State at the World Economic Forum in Davos](#), Iraq in rebuilding war-torn cities after defeating the Islamic State, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. Then on February 12, Iraqi officials organized an international donor's conference at Kuwait, where they proposed [\\$88 billion worth in financial contribution for at](#)

[least 157 reconstruction projects from investors to restore the country's infrastructure.](#) Although \$88 billion is a small amount in view of the scale of destruction in Mosul, Fallujah etc., Iraq's new approach to go out openly in the international forum to seek financial help rather than looking merely towards the US, appears to be a step forward in stabilizing the country. It is likely that Saudi Arabia will not miss this opportunity to counter Iranian influences by playing a major role in rebuilding Iraq. – Kurdistan 24, Dinar Updates

34. \$100b in the offing for Iraq, Libya, Syria

KUWAIT (February 12): A group of Egyptian and Saudi investors are willing [to pump in \\$100 billion to reconstruct Iraq, Libya and Syria.](#) The collaborative initiative was taken by the Federation of Egyptian Chambers of Commerce (FEDCOC), the Council of Saudi Chambers and the Egyptian-Saudi Business Council. [US Secretary Rex Tillerson, also assured another \\$200 million to support reconstruction project in Iraq and Syria.](#) He also signed a memorandum of \$3 billion in financial aid for transportation and other reconstruction-related projects. EU plans to earmark 300 million euros as well for the support of development projects in Iraq. In addition, International NGOs have pledged a total of \$330.130 million in support of the humanitarian endeavour. [Even Kuwait has guaranteed \\$1 billion in loan and \\$1](#)

[billion as direct investment to rebuild Iraq.](#) – *Iraqi News*

35. Iraq spends \$210m on Kurd salaries

BAGHDAD (21 February): The Iraqi government will be spending 250 billion dinars [\$210 million] on [salaries of Kurdish state employees, focusing on the ministers of health and education,](#) and those whose payroll lists are being audited by the Central Government. The Kurdistan region is having difficulties in paying salaries to at least 1.249 million people, an issue that has led to sporadic protests last year. On February 20, 2018, [Iraqi PM also pledged to lift air embargo imposed on Kurdistan Region](#) Iraqi PM also pledged to lift the air embargo imposed on the Kurdistan Region if they handed over the management to the central aviation authorities and if they annulled the results of the controversial referendum. In addition, Iraq is also negotiating disputes over oil exports and revenue-sharing which had stalled after Iraqi forces took control of Kirkuk's oil. – RUDAW, *Iraqi News*

36. Structural economic reforms in KSA

JEDDAH (1 January): The Saudi government has announced an increase in gasoline prices (Octane-91 by 83 percent and Octane-95 by 127 percent), levy on expatriate workers and the citizen account programme as part of structural economic reforms, affirming its commitment to the fiscal balance programme and Vision 2030.

The rise in prices is expected to reduce the consumption and lead to growth of non-oil economy in Saudi Arabia. As part of the expatriate levy, companies and private establishments would have to shell out SR 400 per expatriate worker and expatriate workers would pay SR 200 per dependent. To ease the rise in cost of living due to reforms, the citizen account programme has been initiated in which more than 11 million citizens will receive monthly financial assistance. – *Saudi Gazette*

37. \$15b worth of Israeli gas for Egypt

TEL AVIV (19 February): The operators of the Tamar and Leviathan gas fields have inked an agreement to sell \$15 billion worth of natural gas to Egypt. The information was made public in documents released by Delek Drilling LP on February 19, 2018.

Israel's Delek Drilling and Noble Energy Inc. with other small stakeholders, reached an agreement with the Egyptian company Dolphinus to sell the gas over the first 10 years after production begins. After signing the agreement, Israel [will provide natural gas to both Egypt and Jordan](#), strengthening bilateral relations with two neighbours. – *Jerusalem Post*

38. Iran bid to loosen IRGC grip on economy

TEHRAN (21 January): Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has asked the Revolutionary Guard to loosen its hold on the economy, raising the prospect

that the paramilitary organization might privatize some of its vast holdings.

Getting the IRGC to divest some of its vast economic holdings would be a huge step toward responding to protesters, who are angry about the country's continued weak economy and the corruption that has further weakened the system. – *Valley Morning Star*

39. Turkey mulls 'national' Bitcoins

ANKARA (February 22): The alliance between Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its de facto partner, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) [reportedly looking to launch a national crypto-currency](#). Turkish ministers argue that instead of dismissing crypto-currencies, Ankara must have their own national coin to tokenize asset-backed securities for the insurance, which will yield lower risks. Ahmet Kenan Tanrikulu, the deputy chair of Turkey's Nationalist Movement Party [has also proposed a draft on state-backed crypto-currency, called as 'Turkcoin'](#). On the other hand, law makers argue that there must be a transparency in norms and regulations on crypto-currency in an effort to control the market to avoid illicit use. – *Al Monitor*, Coindesk

INDIA AND THE REGION

40. Sushma Swaraj visits Saudi Arabia

RIYADH (6 February): External Affairs Minister [Sushma Swaraj visited Saudi](#)

[Arabia to attend the opening ceremony of a festival at Janadriya](#), a village near Riyadh as India was accorded the status of guest of honour. She met the Custodian of Two Holy Mosques King Salman and discussed ways to enhance and develop bilateral relations between the two countries. She also held talks with her counterpart, the Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs Adel Al-Jubeir and discussed issues of mutual concern like energy, trade investment, defence and security, culture and people-to-people ties. Adel al Jubeir hosted a luncheon in honour of Indian External Affairs Minister after the talks. The Indian pavilion at the festival showcased glimpses of Indian heritage and modernity – including [Yoga, Ayurveda as well as the country's progress in science and technology](#). [Sushma Swaraj gave a call for collective efforts in fighting the menace of terrorism](#). – *Saudi Gazette, Khaleej Times*

41. 'Good conduct' must for UAE work visa

ABU DHABI (8 January): A 'good conduct' certificate will be mandatory to get work visa in the UAE from February 4, 2018, following recent approval by the coordination committee to execute cabinet resolution no. (1/8#) for 2017.

Applicants of work visa would need a police verification certificate issued by the country of origin or country of residency for the past five years which would be certified by the UAE's missions abroad or attested at customer happiness centres of the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation.

This certificate will be mandatory for expatriates but the dependents and those coming on tourist visa would be exempted. This procedure will ensure creation of a secure community in the UAE. – *Arab News, The National, Khaleej Times, Dubai Eye*.

42. Indian expats oppose UAE passport plan

ABU DHABI (20 January): Many Indian expatriates to the UAE have criticized the Indian government's decision to issue orange passports to people who require emigration clearance to travel to a group of 18 countries (mostly Gulf countries), as a discriminatory move as they believe it would render them as second class citizens.

The ECR passports are given to non-matriculate citizens who wish to work in Gulf countries and in Southeast Asia.

Meanwhile, the UAE has announced in the UNHRC report as part of Universal Periodic Review process, which it will set up an independent national human rights committee on the basis of the internationally-accepted Paris Principles, and a comprehensive national human rights plan will be developed.

This move would have positive implications for 2.8 million Indian expats in UAE as cases of human rights violations remain a major concern. – *Arab News, Khaleej Times, Washington Post, Reuters*

43. Iran eyes oil deals with Indian company

TEHRAN: Iran's is adamant on signing new contracts with Indian Oil Corporation before March 21, but it seems unlikely that this would include the highest-profile fields on offer. The worsening geopolitical tensions in West Asia, especially against Iran, have deterred international investors from returning to the upstream.

Although Iran has managed to bring crude production and exports back to pre-sanctions level, international investment is needed to transition to the next level. "[Oil Minister Bijan Zanganeh says Iran's oil and gas sector needs \\$200bn investment, of which 65-75% \(\\$130-150bn\) would be from international firms.](#) To date, the only post-sanctions deal signed has been the \$4.8 b worth agreement with France's Total and China's CNPC for Phase II of the South Pars gas field."

Meanwhile, the managing director of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), Ali Kardor has said that "he aimed to sign contracts worth \$15 bn with IOC during the current Iranian year (ending on March 20, 2018). With Phase II valued at \$4.8 bn, this implies at least two more deals by late-March." — MEES.

44. Jordan lifts visa restrictions on India

AMMAN (13 February): In an attempt to attract businessmen and tourists from India, the Jordanian government has

lifted visa restrictions on Indian nationals.

The initiative was started by Jordan Investment Commission (JIC) "two days after the arrival of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi", who discussed the various ways of boosting economic cooperation between India and Jordan with King Abdullah. [The decision will ease the entry of Indian businessmen and increase the tourism for Jordan, said JIC.](#) — Ansamed.info

45. Cabinet apprised of MoU with Tunisia

NEW DELHI (7 February 2018): The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been apprised of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between India and Tunisia to encourage cooperation in the field of youth matters. The MoU was signed on October 30, in New Delhi. [It aims at creating an international perspective among young Indians to promote exchange of ideas, values and culture and to involve them in promoting peace and understanding.](#) — Press Information Bureau

46. India, Egypt to boost trade

NEW DELHI (17 January 2018): India and Egypt have discussed ways to boost bilateral trade and supply of agricultural products. According to the Press Trust of India, the Indian Ambassador to Egypt, Sanjay Bhattacharyya met the Egyptian Minister of Supply and Internal Trade, Ali El-Sayed Moselhi on January 16, to discuss ways of enhancing bilateral trade and exploring areas of collaboration.

During the meeting, Ali El-Sayed Moselhi acknowledged India's humanitarian contribution when it delivered an urgent consignment of rice to Egypt in 2016. The minister expressed willingness to expand inter-government agreements for supply of agricultural products. – *Business Standard* and PTI

47. Indian companies in Gulfood Show, 2018

DUBAI (23 February): Indian companies participated in the 23rd edition of the world's largest annual food trade show 'Gulfood' which was held at Dubai World Trade Centre from 17 February 17 to 22. [The show was inaugurated by the UAE Minister of Finance, Shaikh Hamdan Bin Rashid Al Maktoum.](#) Beverages, dairy, fats and oils, pulses, grains and cereals, health and wellness, meat and poultry and power brands were the exhibited sectors. . [The show featured Gulfood innovation awards, global industry outlook report and halal food among others.](#) [Some of the Indian companies that participated were A. Tosh and Sons \(India\) Ltd, Aachi Masala Foods Pvt Ltd, Aaksh beverages Pvt Ltd, Asray Concept foods, Aastha Enterprises, Afro India Trade Shreeyash, Aghin Agro Food Industries P Ltd, Agri Global INC among others.](#) – *Saudi Gazzette, Gulf News*

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