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West Asia Watch

Trends & Analysis

West Asia
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EDITORIAL

West Asia Watch: **Ongoing Conflict and Uncertainties in the Region**

During March –April 2018, the West Asian region witnessed further escalation of conflicts in Syria and Yemen and greater uncertainties in the region. The US led airstrike on April 14, 2018 on Syria in response to alleged chemical weapons attack on civilians in the town of Douma in East Ghouta, by the Bashar Al Assad government created completely new crises situation. This situation has led to a new debate about West Asia becoming an area of ‘new cold war’ between the two major powers the US and Russia.

The announcement of President Trump on 8 May that it will withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal and is preparing to reinstate all sanctions it had waived after signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has further complicated the situation in the West Asian region. While the US is planning to impose additional economic sanctions, Europe, Russia and China have decided to uphold the nuclear deal and emphasised their “continued commitment” to JCPOA. President Trump’s decision is likely to have serious consequences, upsetting the oil market, enhancing tensions in the region, strengthening the power of hardliners within the Iranian regime, leading Iran to perhaps restart its atomic programme. Although the Iranian foreign minister has said that he would work with the other partner countries of the nuclear deal but how the UK, France, Germany, China and Russia will be able save the deal while ensuring full benefits for Iran, remains to be seen. This would also determine the response of Iran. Tensions are already high in the region.

At the broader regional level, Saudi Arabia has been working towards showcasing a new reformed face of the Kingdom to the international community. Attempts to create new pillars of the Saudi economy are underway under its Vision 2030 programme. Simultaneously, the Kingdom is strengthening its regional and international cooperation, including the re-setting of its ties with Israel to counter Iran’s growing influence in the region. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the US are also working on a national security adviser level trilateral security forum. While the situation in Yemen is becoming much more complex, some media reports suggest that secret talks are on between Saudi Arabia and Houthi rebel leaders through Oman, to find a viable solution to the conflict. However, there are no indications about the Qatar crisis getting resolved in the near future. The growing engagement between Iran, Russia and Turkey is an important feature of the regional reality.

The recently concluded Arab League Summit in Dhahran focused on the Palestine issue, finding a solution to the prolonged conflict in Syria and countering Iran’s increasing influence in the region. In its current edition, the newsletter examines these new developments in the region during March and April. The themes covered in the issue include a critical analysis of

various dimensions of the Syrian conflict including the US-led airstrike and its implications, the Ankara Summit; the early elections in Turkey; and growing ties between Qatar and Iran. The issue also carries an exclusive interview with the H.E. Dr Saud bin Mohammed Al Sati, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and a guest column by Ambassador Sanjay Singh, former Secretary, Government of India.

US-led Airstrikes in Syria: An Incipient ‘Cold War’

Adil Rasheed

In the wee hours of 14 April 2018, the US, France, and UK launched the largest barrage of cruise missiles on Syria since the opening of the Iraq War in 2003, in response to what they claim was a chemical weapons attack on the town of Douma by Al-Assad’s government forces on the 7th of April. According to a US spokesman the aim of the air strike was simple: “to stop the regime from using chemical weapons again”.

The US, UK and France claim to have fired a total of 105 cruise missiles from sea and air targeting three alleged chemical weapons-related facilities near Damascus. These sites were the Barzah Research and Development Center, Him Shinshar CW Bunker and the Him Shinshar ‘Chemical Weapons Storage Site’. There were no reported casualties in the attack.

Pentagon says there was supposedly no coordination with Moscow before the strikes took place, but the “de-confliction line” that has been put in place to avoid clashes between Russian and Western jets was in place, and according to Washington and Moscow, it functioned effectively.

However, Russia and Syria claimed that most of the 100-odd missiles fired by US, UK and France from sea and air into Syria were shot down by Syrian air defences. The US denies this and says Syria does not have any air defence capabilities to put down their missiles.

It is remarkable that it was in April 2017, a year ago that Trump had first carried out an airstrike against Syria, when it launched 59

cruise missiles against Al Shayrat air base following the alleged Khan Shaykhoun chemical weapons attack on April 4, 2017.

International Response

Although, there was no threat of a military response from Russia, Syria or any of their allies to these strikes, Russia called an emergency meeting at the UN. But its resolution for condemning the airstrikes failed, with only China and Bolivia voting in favor of the move.

For his part, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres found the development quite disturbing and observed: “The Cold War is back with a vengeance, but with a difference. The mechanisms and the safeguards to manage the risks of escalation that existed in the past no longer seem to be present.”

While Russian President Vladimir Putin called the airstrikes an “act of aggression” Syrian President returned the Legion d’ honneur to France which he received from Jacques Chirac in 2001, because he did not want to wear a medal of what he called ‘a slave country of the US’.

Although, Germany did not take part in the air strikes, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said the operation was “necessary and appropriate” to preserve the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).

However, it is noteworthy that an independent German parliamentary report found that

“Military force used against a state to punish it for infringing an international convention violates the prohibition of force under international law.”

India implicitly criticized the US and its Western allies for the April 14 air strikes. Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson Raveesh Kumar said: “The alleged use of chemical weapons, if true, is deplorable. We call for an impartial and objective investigation by the OPCW to establish the facts,” he said.

“We urge all parties to show restraint and to avoid any further escalation”. The current impasse “should be resolved through dialogue and negotiations, and on the basis of the principles of the UN Charter and in accordance with international law”.

The Douma ‘chemical attacks’

The stated cause for these airstrikes was the alleged chemical attacks carried out by Syrian forces in the town of Douma on the outskirts of Damascus, where the regime has successfully pushed back US and Saudi-supported jihadists, mainly the Jaysh Al-Islam.

Since 9 March, 80,000 Syrians have reportedly left eastern Ghouta district, which culminated in the Douma ‘chemical attacks’ that killed over 40 people, and injured about a hundred.

Russia's foreign ministry claims that the video evidence of the Douma attacks (which has gone viral) was staged and filmed by rebels at the behest of British intelligence. Currently, Russian military police is deployed in the district of Eastern Ghouta to supervise security.

West’s Attempted Show of Strength

Several reasons have been attributed for the US, UK and France for conducting the airstrikes on Syria. It is claimed that the US announced that in spite of the growing control of the Al-Assad regime in Syria, backed by his Russian and Iranian benefactors, the US-led international alliance is not out of the game in Syria. It may currently not appear to have the strategic upper hand, but it still wields the big stick and the opposition better beware.

The air strikes tried to rally the increasingly beleaguered US allies in Syria, with Israel, Saudi Arabia and even Turkey greeting the attacks as a show of strength and a welcome reprieve. The airstrikes are said to have boosted the morale of the forces on the ground – the moderate opposition factions against Al-Assad. Observers also claim that President Trump carried out the strikes to show he meant what he tweeted, and unlike former US President Barack Obama, kept to his ‘red line’ commitment against the use of chemical weapons.

Thus, US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley said on 14 April, “When our president draws a red line, our president enforces the red line,” she added. The action is said to have been well received by the right wing constituency that mainly voted for him to win in the last US presidential elections.

The airstrikes also demonstrated cohesion between the US and its European allies (France and Britain) that was questioned in recent months following their differences over the Jerusalem vote at the UN late last year and over the Iran nuclear deal. The action is also seen as a signal to Iran that it accepts renegotiation of the deal as Western patience against its regional ambitions is wearing thin.

Conclusion

The main criticism — even among US political observers and media — was that these airstrikes were not effective but merely symbolic in their import. One could hardly say with certainty that the strikes would deter the Syrian regime from conducting more chemical attacks in the future. President Trump had attacked Syrian chemical weapons sites even in April 2017, still a major chemical weapons attack allegedly occurred a year later. Perhaps, stockpiles of chemical weapons still remain hidden in other places in Syria, even as a lot of US taxpayers' money was wasted on missiles in destroying questionable chemical weapons sites in these airstrikes.

More important, the airstrikes did not seem part of any clear US strategy on Syria and were criticized for being an attempt to cover up America's losing control and influence in this theatre of war. To others, Syria had clearly become the arena for a new 'Cold War', where US and Russia fight each other diplomatically and through their proxies, but at the same time observe 'de-confliction' lines in the war zone.

(Dr. Adil Rasheed is Research Fellow at the IDSA)

The Festering Quagmire: Wars within Syria

Nagapushpa Devendra

The Syrian civil war, which continues to overwhelm all attempts at a political resolution, reached a new unpredictable level of intensity in recent months. There has been an escalation in violence on at least four fronts: Turkish authorities have made a major military offensive in the Afrin region of Syria, Israel has launched several aerial attacks against Iran-Syrian forces in the southwestern border of the country, President Assad's forces have unleashed a brutal assault on the rebel enclave of East Ghouta-Idlib Province and the US, France and the UK conducted joint air strikes against alleged Syrian chemical weapons facilities in mid-April.

These four major intersecting conflicts waging in Syria at this time are studied in depth below.

Assad's Forces Hit Rebels Hard

The Syrian uprising against the Assad regime, which had once escalated into a full-blown armed conflict involving various rebel factions, appears to be slowly heading towards its end. There is a clear absence of leadership and cohesion among the rebels. The influx of foreign fighters has ended and foreign aid, even coming from the US, has been suspended, even as support for the Assad regime has increased. The last remaining bastions against the Assad regime do not seem properly equipped or adept at fighting against

Assad's forces. Still, the fight between the Syrian army and Islamist rebels affiliated to Al-Qaeda continues to wage in Ghouta suburb and Idlib province.

In early January, Assad's army geared up for a major assault on Eastern Ghouta to put an end to the rebel resistance (mainly the jihadist groups like Ahrar-al-Sham). The Syrian army also pushed deep into Idlib province, which is supposed to be a "de-escalation zone", violating the ceasefire signed in 2016 between Russia, Turkey and the Assad regime.

While the fighting in Idlib province continues to escalate, Turkey has demanded the regime to halt the violence. The reason for Turkey's concern was that the fighting in Idlib might initiate another "wave" of migration heading towards the border. Turkish citizens have already expressed resentment towards increasing Syrian refugees seeking asylum in their country. Last year, violent clashes broke out between Syrian refugees and Turkish citizens. Human rights groups say Turkey has become an unsafe country for millions of migrants and refugees seeking to settle down in Europe.

This led Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu to summon Russia and Iran and deliver a diplomatic complaint. For its part, Russia has blamed Turkey for its 'negligence' in monitoring rebels in Idlib who were attacking Moscow's military base in Latakia.

On the other hand, Syrian state media has accused Turkey of aiding the rebel counterattack. This has caused a rift between these major players.

In February, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham shot down Russian Sukhoi SU-25 by a portable air-defense system (MANPADS), the first such attack since Moscow's intervention in Syria. Although it is yet to be ascertained from where the rebels got access to MANPADS, as the US has officially stopped supplying it to them, fearing Al-Qaeda will find a way to steal them. The incident has further escalated tension between Russia and Turkey, which is supposed to secure Idlib from the rebels but is busy plotting a belligerent evacuation of the Kurds instead. Thus, in the immediate aftermath of the incident, Russia launched airstrikes in Idlib for two consecutive days, causing large-scale civilian casualties. In fact, multiple state media outlets reported that in 48 hours the Syrian army along with their Russian ally had liberated more than 70 villages and towns from the rebels in the Idlib province. With this remarkable progress, the Syrian government has recaptured nearly 80% of territories from the rebels. Many rebels' groups have either been liquidated, have surrendered or have assimilated into other factions.

On the other hand, Syrian government is continuing its offensive in Eastern Ghouta and has captured more than 50% of the territory. So far Russia has opened a five-hour ceasefire window to allow civilians to evacuate and humanitarian aid to enter. For the past few weeks the situation in Ghouta, especially in Douma, Hamouriyah, Harasta and the Qalamoun region has reached a critical level. Syrians who were displaced by the fighting elsewhere in the enclave have fled to these areas, but are now besieged and are being constantly bombarded and surrounded by pro-government and rebel forces. By April 12, all of Eastern Ghouta was declared under the

control of the Syrian army and Russian military police patrols. However, it appears that Assad is not going to stop bombarding the militants' enclave until he recaptures territories near the capital or moves on to bigger targets.

Iran-Israel Fight it Out in Syria

Meanwhile, Israel is reportedly increasing its military activities deeper into opposition-held southern Syria. After a range of failed attempts at ensuring its interest were safeguarded by major players like the US, Israel is now trying to implement 'Plan B' of its "safe-zone" project. It is reportedly trying to establish a barrier stretching from Golan Heights to the southern Syrian province of Quneitra and Daraa. The bufferzone, which will serve both political and military purposes, might also help legalize Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights. In other words, it will then become much harder to debate whether the Golan must belong to Syria, if Damascus is no longer in full control of the territory on its side of the border.

Nonetheless, in February, while conducting an air-raid on Iranian bastions, an Israeli jet was shot down for the first time by Syrian air defence. In response, Israel immediately started attacking Syria, including its air-defence sites, and even targeted Iranian strongholds in that country. For its part, Iran dismissed Israeli allegations of an Iranian drone incursion inside its territory as "ridiculous".

As Israel's retaliatory strikes inside Syria intensified, Russian President Vladimir Putin called on Israeli premier Benjamin Netanyahu and assured him of reining-in Iranian activities in Syria. Unconvinced by Putin's assurance, Netanyahu then called Trump to discuss ways to curb Iran from using anti-aircraft batteries against Israeli jets carrying

out strikes in Syria. But it appears that he was not convinced with the U.S approach in Syria either, resulting in another alleged strike targeting T4 base in Syria in mid-April. This strike escalated tensions in Syria, leading Russia to condemn Israeli strikes and accusing Israel of violating Syrian sovereignty. Again, Iran and Hezbollah described the attack as blatant Israeli aggression.

In fact, Iranian foreign ministry spokesperson promised on April 16, “Israel will get the necessary response sooner or later,” adding that “the days of hit and run are over.” It is likely that Iran has understood that the attack on T-4 base actually exposed the strategic vulnerability of Iran as it depends largely on the Syrian air-defence systems, which are unprotected at present. In addition, Hezbollah, its key strategist in the region, is preoccupied with upcoming elections in Lebanon. It appears that Iran is going to re-think and reorganize its strategies on the Syrian border, while covertly plotting its next move against Israel.

Turkey’s Offensive in Afrin

On 21 January, Turkey began its ground incursion into the Afrin region of Syria and called it Operation Olive Branch. The offensive is purportedly against the Kurdish-led Democratic Union Party in Syria (PYD), its armed wing People's Protection Units (YPG), which is considered a terror group by Turkey since 1984 and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) positions surrounding the city of Afrin. The move came after the US announced its plan to form a new “border security” force in areas that were liberated from the ISIS.

Despite the Syrian government’s threat to shoot down warplanes in its airspace, Turkey dispatched its military chief to Russia to seek approval for intense aerial bombardment that signalled the opening of hostilities in a new

phase of Ankara’s involvement in the multi-sided war across the border. Thereafter, Turkey stated that it is fighting against ISIS and wants to create a 30 km deep “safe zone” in Afrin that could be used to move Syrian refugees back across the border at minimal risk.

On the other side of the conflict, the then US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson denied the plan to establish a border security force. The growing tension in Afrin obliged US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, to visit Turkey where he expressed his concern over Ankara’s security dilemma. Previously, US National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster assured Turkish presidential adviser Ibrahim Kalin during a telephonic conversation that it will not provide any more weapons to the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia.

This raised scepticism amongst Kurdish forces, who later decided to reconcile with Damascus, an unwelcomed development for the US. It is likely that Damascus wants to defend Afrin to get easy access to food and oil from Kurdish-held northeastern Syria. Nonetheless, this triggered Ankara to urge US to prevent Syrian democratic forces from deployment against it. Thus, the renewed conflict led all the involved actors to switch their sides to pursue their mutual interest which includes the new US–Turkey and its FSA, Assad-YPG alliance in the Syrian civil war. Previously, the Turkish government warned the US and its forces embedded with the Kurds around Manbij that if they did not skedaddle they might go for a war. In response, the head of CENTCOM, General Joseph Votel and the commander of the US led anti-ISIS forces operating in northeastern Syria, reiterated that “American troops positioned near Manbij will not be redeployed to enable a Turkish attack on that city.”

While, the Turkish government claimed that its forces had driven the militias back out of

Afrin, forces allied to Assad entered the Kurdish-held enclave to help YPG fight. However, with the help of the Free Syrian Army and tank defense, Turkey seized Afrin and is now planning to move into Manbij. However, the bigger question here is to see how deep Turkey is going to push before the Syrian government and Russia-Iran decide enough is enough.

US-led Airstrikes

On 14 April 2018, US-UK-France launched a joint massive strike on Syria justifying their actions with the alleged use of chemical weapons in Douma on 7 April. Multiple reports states that it was French President Emmanuel Macron who persuaded US President Donald Trump to launch airstrikes as punishment for an alleged chemical weapons attack. Shortly after the French President, UK Prime Minister Theresa May released a statement saying she had "authorized British armed forces to conduct coordinated and targeted strikes to degrade the Syrian regime's chemical weapons capability and deter their use." In fact, in the

aftermath of the incident, Macron and Theresa May are steering an international debate in a direction that forestalls another US strike and might consider establishing a non-military mechanism for responding to future alleged chemical attacks.

While discussing the US-led strike, US ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley stressed that the US will not withdraw from Syria until a desired result to the conflict is achieved. Many observers feel the US-led strikes have damaged the prospects of a political resolution in Syria anytime soon.

Conclusion

After seven years of war with hundreds of thousands of deaths and nearly 9 million displaced, Syria continues to draw in new international actors into its melee. The involvement of various internal and external actors makes the war complex and points to its escalation for years.

(Nagapushpa Devendra is Research Assistant at IDSA)

Ankara Summit: The Search for Political Solution in Syria

Lakshmi Priya

Russia, Iran and Turkey convened a summit at Ankara on 4 April 2018 to deliberate on a possible ceasefire across Syria and discuss the future of that country following the Sochi summit held in January. The prolonged civil strife in Syria has led to heavy diplomatic exchanges and a series of meetings in recent months. Thus, the Ankara summit was preceded by a preparatory ministerial meet in Kazakhstan for the upcoming ninth round of Astana talks. Earlier, the eighth round of parleys among Syrian factions, the second round of opposition meet at Riyadh and UN-convened intra-Syria talks at Vienna had already taken place in a quest to bring peace to Syria.

Endorsing the Astana Track

The Ankara summit was a high-level meeting of three heads of state that are actively engaged in the Syrian peace process. Foreign ministers of Russia, Iran and Turkey met at Astana for preparatory talks before the Presidents of their respective countries met at Ankara. These countries unanimously emphasized that the Astana framework is the only effective international initiative that has helped reduce violence in Syria. They reaffirmed their resolve to cooperate on Syria for the achievement of a lasting ceasefire and the

advancement of the political process, as envisaged by the UNSCR 2254.

The Ankara summit reiterated its support for the Syrian National Dialogue Congress held at Sochi, where representatives agreed for the formation of a Syrian constitutional committee for constitutional reforms. All the three heads of state at Ankara, called for the beginning of the constitutional committee's work in Geneva at the earliest.

The Intra-Syrian divide

Though the international community has been emphasizing on a political solution for Syria, breakthrough has been elusive due to lack of convergence between the Syrian opposition and the Assad regime. After the seventh round of Astana talks, Russia, Iran and Turkey announced that the Syrian National Dialogue Congress will be held at Sochi to find a political solution to the Syrian crisis, as violence had subsided considerably. However, the regime's offensive in Eastern Ghouta and alleged chemical attacks in Douma have once again undermined the prospects of a political solution.

Secondly, the regime and the opposition need to diplomatically engage for achieving political solutions in Syria. Though 1600 Syrians, representing

various factions, participated in the Sochi Congress, major opposition groups including the Higher Negotiation Council, boycotted the event claiming it to be divisive and fragmentary. The Syrian regime showed its reluctance to participate at the Sochi summit, as removal of the Syrian President Bashar al Assad was the first issue on its agenda. However, later, it sent a delegation of 680 members. Similarly, after welcoming the constitutional committee formed at Sochi initially, it later rejected it saying: “We are not bound by anything that is formed by foreign sides, whatever their name or state”. The constitutional committee is to include the Syrian government, representatives of opposition groups that participated in intra-Syrian talks, members of civil society, tribal leaders and women, as a political solution can only come from within.

Commitment to Fight ISIS

The Syrian regime’s role is important for attaining a political solution in that country. Since December 2016, Assad’s position has strengthened in Syria as Russia militarily intervened to defeat ISIS and to seize control of rebel-held territories. The intervention has helped the Assad regime to emphasize its inevitable rule in Syria and reject any interference from the international community. Major parts of Syria are now under the regime’s control with less than 5% left in ISIS’ hands, mainly in the western part of the country.

The joint statement issued at the conclusion of the Ankara summit,

reaffirmed the pledge of Russia, Iran and Turkey to cooperate with each other and eliminate ISIS, the Nusra Front and other jihadist entities associated with them. However, they strongly rejected all attempts to create new realities on the ground under the pretext of combating terrorism and the separatist agendas undermining the sovereignty and security of Syria and neighbouring countries.

Turkey Supports US Air Strikes

It is noteworthy that following the Ankara summit, Turkey supported the US-led air strike on Syria, which demonstrates its shaky diplomatic balancing act between Russia and the US. Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan welcomed the US-led air strikes and called it an “appropriate” response; while Turkish Prime Minister Yinali Bildirim described it as a “positive step”.

Turkey’s objectives in Syria differ from those of Russia and Iran, in that it supports the overthrow of the Assad regime, unlike them. Its Afrin offensive in Syria and support for rebel forces makes it a major threat for the Assad regime. Meanwhile, China opposed the US led airstrikes claiming it violated international law. China’s willingness to engage in the rebuilding of Syria and including it in the Belt and Road Initiative might suggest an inclination towards joining the Syrian peace process.

The role of regional players like Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries cannot

be overlooked as far as finding a political solution to the Syrian crisis is concerned. Saudi Arabia has been supporting opposition groups since the beginning of Syrian crisis and has been holding opposition meeting at Riyadh. It is not a mere coincidence that the day Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman concluded his trip to the US, France and Spain, the same evening US, France and UK launched the strike on Syria. Though at Arab summit, the issue of US strike

was not raised, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE, and Oman openly appreciated the US-led strikes. Qatar allowed its Al Udeid base to be used for the launch of the missiles, while Kuwait voted against the Russian draft to condemn the strikes at United Nations. Peace talks will continue advocating a political solution for Syria; however it will not fructify until the international community reaches a consensus on the future of Assad in Syria.

(Lakshmi Priya is Research Assistant at IDSA)

Early Elections in Turkey: A Litmus Test for Erdogan

Md. Muddassir Quamar

The announcement of snap parliamentary and presidential elections in Turkey has not come as a surprise. Speculations about early elections were rife for months and the only thing which was asked was when President Recep Tayyip Erdogan would go for snap elections. Now that it has been announced that Turkey will go for elections in June, more than a year before the due date in November 2019, Ankara is witnessing significant upsurge in political activity.

Given the current support for the Justice and Development Party (AKP), the surge in nationalist sentiments after the Turkish incursion in Afrin and a divided and weak opposition, it is expected that Erdogan will have a cakewalk. However, the president can face serious challenge due to three factors. Firstly, the Turkish economy is facing a serious downturn. With the benefit of hindsight it can be argued that the AKP has been able to win repeated elections in Turkey mainly on the basis of its economic performance. In 2002, Turkey was faced with serious economic challenges. The Turkish Lira was devalued by nearly 50% , the GDP growth rate had hit a low of -7.35%, inflation was raging at 37.5% and unemployment rate was 10.8%. The AKP after coming to power was able to turnaround the economy and gain support of the surging middle classes. However, as things stand in 2018, the Turkish economy

is in serious trouble. The value of Turkish Lira has been falling and as of April 2018, its value against the US Dollar is at a record low of 0.25. Simultaneously, the current account deficit has risen to US \$47 billion amidst an increasing inflation recorded at 10% in March 2018. Though the economy has recorded exemplary growth in the last quarter of 2017 at 7.5%, international agencies forecast the growth rate to slowdown in 2018 due to growing external debt and current account deficit. Hence, despite the buoyant mood, the economy can still throw a surprise for Erdogan.

Secondly, the political realignments can lead to significant headaches for the AKP. For the large part of the current term of the AKP government, except during the April 2017 referendum for changing the system of government, the Turkish opposition has been a divided house. Republican People's Party (CHP), the main opposition party and its leader since 2010, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, have failed to capitalize on the failings of the AKP government. Kılıçdaroğlu has also been unable to forge a broad based coalition of opposition parties to put up a challenge for Erdogan. The second largest opposition party, the People's Democratic Party (HDP) which had an extraordinary showing in the June 2015 elections by winning more than 13% of the votes and had a slightly lower share of votes in the November 2015 snap elections of about

10%, has been facing serious problems due to action taken by the government against its leaders. Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ Şenoğlu, the joint former chairs of HDP have been languishing in jail for allegedly supporting armed insurgency and dissent. Despite the disarray in the opposition, the announcement of snap elections can fast change the equation. Reportedly, the CHP has reached out to the opposition parties including the Good Party and the Virtue Party who were once allies of the AKP. Reports of backroom negotiations to put up a joint presidential candidate to challenge Erdogan in his presidential race, have delighted his critics.

Thirdly, the AKP faces serious challenges at the foreign policy front. Even though arguably the impact of foreign policy on national elections can be limited, the way Erdogan has gone about conducting his foreign policy since 2011 has not only been erratic but also significantly embarrassing at times for the Turkish people. Turkey's inability to have cordial relations with the European Union, its failings on the Syrian front, the tensions with the US and NATO, its keenness to have a say in Middle East politics and more importantly, the linking of the Kurdish insurgency to foreign policy in Syria and Iraq have led to serious debates in the country. Despite curbs on media and the continuing crackdown on

press freedom, many Turkish analysts have been critical of Erdogan's erratic foreign policy and this can become an issue in the elections. The opposition groups, especially the CHP and HDP, can rake up the issue of loss of Turkish lives in Syria, the growing insurgency in the Kurd-dominated southwestern region and the lack of any movement towards joining the European Union to challenge the AKP and Erdogan.

Given these challenges, the snap elections might not turn out to be the expected cakewalk for President Erdogan. The political situation in Turkey is not completely different from that of early 2015 when AKP was faced with serious economic challenges and a stronger opposition. One might recall that the June 2015 election results had thrown a surprise result with a hung parliament and the worst electoral performance of AKP with only 40% votes. Despite the strong situation in which the AKP is in today, the snap elections can throw some surprises. While the opposition will be fighting for survival, the snap elections might prove to be a risky gamble by Erdogan who is vying for a lifetime presidency.

(Md. Muddassir Quamar is Associate Fellow at IDSA)

The Ascending Qatar-Iran Relationship

Prasanta Kumar Pradhan

Qatar and Iran have come closer together in the aftermath of the boycott of Qatar by its neighbours — Saudi Arabia, The UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt – in June 2017. Qatar had to face isolation as these countries cut off all political and economic links and pressurised Qatar to agree to their demands. In such a difficult situation, Iran came to Qatar's aid immediately. Iran sent shiploads of food and medicine and assured all sorts of political and economic support. Iran opened its air space, ground, and sea routes for Qatar. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani described the act of the Saudi-led group as a 'siege' and vowed to stand with Qatar.

Iran has condemned the isolation of Qatar by stating that sanctions are not the rightful way of dealing with a country. For Qatar, the boycott by the Saudi-led group is against international law and ethics. Even after the announcement of the boycott, the group put up a list of demands and urged Qatar to meet those demands immediately.

Qatar rejected the ultimatums and both sides hardened their position with each passing day. The pressure from the Saudi-led group has been growing continuously and thus, Qatar's proximity towards Iran has grown stronger.

Diplomatic Ties Restored

Ever since, both Qatari and Iranian leaders have urged for enhanced and continuous engagements with each other. Qatar has now restored full diplomatic ties with Iran which it snapped in January 2016 along with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and UAE after some Iranian protesters protesting against the execution of prominent Saudi Shia leader Nimr Al Nimr, attacked the Saudi consulate in Mashhad. Exchange of bilateral visits by leaders and officials have been taking place and both the countries are trying to establish relations in diverse fields.

In October 2017, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif visited Doha and met with Qatar's Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and discussed ways to further strengthen bilateral cooperation between the two countries.

In order to facilitate trade and commerce between the two countries, Qatar's Minister of Transport and Communications Jassim bin Saif Ahmed Al Sulaiti visited Tehran in October 2017 and during his visit both the countries agreed to form 'a joint committee to facilitate trade exchange and air and maritime transport'.

Bilateral Trade

In November 2017, Qatar's Minister of Economy and Commerce Ahmed bin Jassim Al Thani visited Iran to further bilateral trade between the two countries. He met Iran's Minister of Industry, Mines and Trade Mohammad Shariatmadari who stated that Qatar has proposed to increase bilateral trade with Iran substantially from below \$1 billion to \$5 billion annually. Qatar, Iran and Turkey signed a tripartite transportation agreement whereby Iran has agreed to facilitate transport of goods between Turkey and Qatar.

Further, interest of both the countries over natural gas is another key factor in their relationship. Qatar and Iran share the world's largest gas field, South Pars (also known as North Dome in Qatar) in the Persian Gulf. Both countries have significant interests to collaborate in further developing the gas field.

In the field of security, Qatar and Iran signed an agreement in April 2018 to increase joint sea patrols on their maritime boundary. According to the agreement, border security personnel will exchange information regarding any security challenges emerging in their maritime boundary.

As sailors and fishermen sometimes enter each other's territorial waters, both countries in a friendly gesture have agreed to examine and resolve such issues quickly so as to avoid any misunderstanding arising between them. This gesture shows the growing trust and confidence in the relationship between the two countries. Further, as the Qatari leadership feared

that Saudi Arabia and UAE wanted to invade their country, destabilise and change its regime, strong security cooperation with Iran and Turkey became a viable option for Qatar.

Iran Benefits from Wedge in GCC

With tensions rising and pressures from Arab Gulf neighbouring countries continuously increasing, Qatar looked up to Iran for trade, transportation, as well as for forging security cooperation. The situation has turned out to be advantageous for Iran and its regional politics. Iran, who had been facing a united and powerful Arab political bloc in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), has now found the unity among the Gulf Arabs shaken. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain have openly called for the boycott of Qatar while two other members – Kuwait and Oman – have maintained neutrality and are mediating in the conflict.

Iran, therefore, perceives it as a good opportunity to engage with Qatar, weaken the GCC and shrink Saudi influence over its smaller neighbours. Iran very well realises that the strength of Saudi Arabia lies in a united GCC, therefore any cracks within the GCC is an opportunity which Iran would not miss. On its part, Qatar was facing the dilemma of submitting before the regional authority of Saudi Arabia, meeting its demands and compromising on its independent foreign policy, or enduring economic and political isolation by its neighbours. It chose the latter option and found a willing Iran to engage with. The situation has thus emerged as a huge

geopolitical advantage for Iran vis-a-vis its arch rival Saudi Arabia in the region.

Continuing Iran-Qatar Differences

However, the increasing intensity of engagements does not eliminate the differences that exist between the two countries. They still have differences over the role of the US in the region. While Qatar hosts the US air force at the Al Udeid airbase, Iran is completely opposed to any kind of US military presence in the region. Similarly, Iran and Qatar are on the opposite sides in the Syrian theatre, with the former supporting the regime while the other siding with opposition forces.

Till June 2017, Qatari forces were present in Yemen fighting against the Houthis who receive political support from Tehran. Qatar, being a member of the GCC, has mostly sided with its Gulf Arab neighbours on most of the political and security issues affecting the region. But despite the existence of such differences, the relationship between Qatar and Iran is moving at a faster clip post the boycott by the Saudi-led group. As the situation unfolds today, the growing Qatar-Iran relationship is moving on an upward trajectory and it holds the potential to affect the regional geopolitics of West Asia.

(Prasanta Kumar Pradhan is Associate Fellow at IDSA)

“There are more opportunities today for Saudi Arabia and India to tap into than ever before”, says Saudi Ambassador

Interview with Ambassador Dr Saud bin Mohammed Al Sati

In an exclusive interview to West Asia Watch, conducted by Dr Meena Singh Roy, H.E. Dr Saud bin Mohammed Al Sati, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to India expressed his views on the current socio-economic changes in the Kingdom, regional conflicts, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and the various facets of India- Saudi Arabia relations.

1. What are the new socio-economic and religious changes unfolding in Saudi Arabia under the leadership of HRH Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud?

To promote growth and build a thriving country, HRH Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud chalked out Vision 2030 around three fundamental themes -- a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation. The Kingdom and its people are in relentless pursuit of the vision to make our country a pioneering and successful global model of excellence on all fronts.

We are transforming our education system to equip students with multi-faceted knowledge and values that help their individual characters emerge and flourish. We are diversifying and unleashing the

capabilities of promising sectors to create the new pillars of the Saudi economy. As the cradle of Islam, the Kingdom takes great pride in serving the Two Holy Mosques. We are working with the strategic objective of providing the opportunity for the largest number of Muslims possible to perform Haj and Umrah.

HRH Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said at the unveiling of Vision 2030: “We have all the means to achieve our dreams and ambitions. There are no excuses for us to stand still or move backwards”.

1. What are the key security challenges faced by the Kingdom?

The Kingdom is the largest country in West Asia. It is regarded as a natural leader of the Gulf, the Arab world as well as the Islamic world, owing to its unique geographical and strategic location straddling the Arabian Peninsula as well as the fact that the two holiest sites of Islam, Makka and Medina, are located in the Kingdom.

But, its unique location has also made it subject to multifaceted threats – from Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula on its southern border to Daesh in the north, in Iraq and Syria to the clandestine activities of Al-Qaeda and Daesh in the Kingdom

itself. The Kingdom has responded by taking firm action against terrorism and extremism and taking the role of regional leader and committed global partner to combat terrorism.

We acknowledge our responsibility as a leader and strive for peace and welfare of the entire region. Unfortunately, our neighbouring country, Iran's sponsorship of terrorism caused turmoil and instability in the entire region. It is not only the biggest destabilizing force in West Asia but also the biggest state sponsor of terrorism in the world. Since the 1979 Revolution, it has used terrorism as an instrument of its foreign policy. The Iranian regime does not believe in the principle of good neighbourliness or non-interference in the affairs of others. Their interference in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Yemen, and Afghanistan proves this beyond doubt. Just recently, the Kingdom of Morocco also severed ties with Iran, accusing it of supporting the so called Polisario Front. As our Foreign Minister Mr Adel Al Jubeir said, this is another solid proof of Iran's interference in the region.

They believe in exporting revolution to other countries as a part of their foreign policy, and under the pretext of supporting the dispossessed they justify their intervention in other countries' internal affairs. The fact is the region is destabilized because of their interventions and the most dispossessed people [who] need help are the Iranian people [who] demonstrate, protesting against their living conditions. Terrorist groups are now provided by Iran with ballistic missiles, drones, and suicidal boats that are used against cities,

commercial ships, and oil tankers. Iran is causing the greatest threat to stability in the region.

2. How can problems in Yemen be addressed?

Saudi Arabia is working with its coalition partners as well as with the United Nations towards achieving political solution based on the UNSC Resolution No. 2216, the GCC Initiative and the Yemini National Dialogue Conference outcomes.

We know very well that the entire crisis has been orchestrated by none other than Iran. We have long been a target of terrorism perpetrated by Iranian proxies. Yemen shares a 1,100-mile border with Saudi Arabia and Iran is supporting and arming the Houthi terrorist militias with suicide drones and mines. We have intercepted Iranian ships carrying weapons, to the Houthi rebels in Yemen. With Iran's help they have become the first terrorist group in history to possess drones, suicidal boats and ballistic missiles.

Despite heightened security concerns, we extended \$11 billion in humanitarian aid to all the provinces in Yemen – including areas controlled by the Houthi rebels. KS Relief is currently operating 217 projects in the country and it has spent nearly \$925 million from May 2015 till March 2018 in Yemen.

We allowed Yemenis who fled the Yemen and entered the Kingdom illegally to adjust their status and become legal residents. We are the single largest donor of humanitarian aid to Yemen, having provided health, nutrition, and sanitation aid and relief to 17 million people impacted

by the conflict. We have our beliefs rooted in Islam – the religion of mercy, tolerance, and co-existence.

Earlier this year in March, the ‘Yemen Comprehensive Humanitarian Operations’ (YCHO) was set up by Saudi Arabia. Its objectives are to improve the humanitarian situation in Yemen by addressing the immediate aid shortfalls. The plan is specifically designed to address the needs of Yemenis. These operations will enhance the flow and delivery of humanitarian aid and commercial supplies, including fuel, medical supplies, and food, to all Yemenis. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia also deposited \$2 billion in the Yemeni Central Bank to promote economic stabilization and improve the Yemeni people’s quality of life. This is in addition to a \$1 billion deposit that Saudi Arabia contributed in 2014.

The opening of 22 entry points (10 sea, 7 land and 5 air) under the YCHO plan, along with the opening of Ma'rib airport, will enhance humanitarian activities and support the work of the NGOs and INGOs operating in Yemen to increase the number of beneficiaries in all Yemeni cities and governorates.

4. Current situation in Syria is getting more complex, in this context, what is the role Saudi Arabia can play?

The Kingdom has sought international efforts to find peaceful solutions since the beginning of the conflict to spare the Syrian people the human tragedy they are experiencing today. The only solution to the crisis is through a political route. Our

cabinet recently stressed its support for alleviating the suffering of the Syrian people who are subjected to horrific war crimes.

We believe the solution should be in accordance with Geneva 1 Declaration and the UNSC Resolution No. 2254. Even as we are fighting as one of the founding members of the US-led coalition against Da’esh in Syria, we are also at the forefront of countries supporting the Syrian people to meet their humanitarian needs and alleviate their suffering. Saudi Arabia has taken in over 2 million of Syrians from the war-torn country and provided more than \$700 million in aid to the Syrian people. The displaced Syrians who came to Saudi Arabia were never treated as refugees. They were not placed in camps. The Kingdom made sure they integrated well in the country. They were given the freedom to move about and those who wished to remain in Saudi Arabia were given legal permanent residency status, which gives them access to services – such as free medical care, the right to work in the Saudi labour market and education.

5. What are your views on recent debate on re-setting of Saudi-Israeli ties?

The Kingdom remains committed to the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 which upholds East Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state. We have also made our position on the matter clear to the United States. In fact, with the desire to highlight the issue on the agenda of the Arab League and in the mind of the Arab and Islamic world, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques named the recently held

Arab summit as the 'Jerusalem Summit'. The Arab and Islamic countries feel the need to highlight this issue in light of the urgent need to help the Palestinians to obtain their legitimate rights, foremost of which is the establishment of their independent state with Jerusalem as its capital. We call for international support to foster peace in the region and alleviate human suffering. The Kingdom recently donated \$150 million to the Waqf Support Program in Jerusalem and \$50 million to support the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) Program.

6. How is Saudi Arabia reshaping its relations with US, China and Russia?

United States and Saudi Arabia are longstanding allies working together to preserve peace, prosperity and stability in the region. Both our countries work closely on counter-terrorism demonstrated by the fact that the Kingdom co-chairs the Counter ISIL Finance Group along with the United States. The economic partnership between the two countries is very strong.

We have friendly relations and good cooperation with Russia. Recently, in February our Minister of Energy, Industry and Mineral Resources His Excellency Khalid al-Falih, went to the port in Sabetta in Russia's far north to open a \$27 billion liquefied natural gas plant, in the company of his counterpart Alexander Novak and President Vladimir Putin. Both our countries cooperate to stabilize [the] oil market. We have in the past year grown into deeper engagement, including proposals for corporate joint ventures and

investments. We also have friendly ties and good cooperation with China, one of our largest trading partners.

7. How would you describe the present status of Saudi-India relations?

Our relations are excellent and growing for the benefit of our two peoples and the region. India has been an integral part of our growth journey. Our partnership has grown beyond the supply of crude oil, refined products and LPG to a comprehensive energy partnership focusing on investment and joint ventures in petrochemical complexes and cooperation in joint exploration.

About seven months back, Saudi Aramco expanded its presence in India. Aramco India is planning to expand its operation by introducing hydrocarbon sector services functions, including engineering services and IT. On the 11th of April, Saudi Aramco announced a \$44-billion deal to build a giant refinery complex in India with three Indian firms. The refinery will be able to process around 1.2 million barrels of crude oil a day.

Equally recently, India's Energy Efficiency Services Limited (EESL) signed a MoU with Saudi's National Energy Services Company to implement energy efficiency programs and scale-up demand side measures in the Kingdom. Saudi Petrochemical company SABIC has also set up an R&D Centre in Bengaluru, with an investment of over \$100 million. Going ahead, our current bilateral trade, which stands at \$26.71 billion, should further grow as we engage in a host of new areas.

India is also helping us increase women's participation in the workforce from the current level of 22% to 30% – an important goal of Vision 2030 which recognizes the role of Saudi women in the economic and social development of the Kingdom. Saudi Aramco, GE and Tata Consultancy Services have successfully set up a business operations centre in Riyadh.

All these instances reflect how closely our growth stories are intertwined. But our relations are not restricted to goods and services. The warmth in our relationship with India comes from the people.

We are much grateful to every Indian who has stepped on our soil and contributed to our country's development. The number of Indians in the Kingdom has increased to 3.2 million, forming the largest expatriate community in the Kingdom. The expertise, sense of discipline, law abiding nature of the Indian community makes it the 'most preferred' in the Kingdom.

8. How can these relations be cemented in the future and what could be the possible new areas of cooperation between the two countries?

There are more opportunities today for Saudi Arabia and India to tap into than ever before. A \$100 billion planned investment in transport projects will occur over the next decade in Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom's construction market is also expected to reach a record high of \$96.52 billion in 2025, up from \$45.33 billion in 2016.

As friends, the two nations have a long way to go. Both Saudi Arabia and India are in

the midst of major socio-economic transformations. To think of it, since 1990, roughly the same time the Indian economy opened up, Saudi Arabia's economy more than quadrupled in size. And there has been no looking back for India either, slated to overtake Japan and Germany to become the third largest economy in less than 10 years! Both the countries are blessed with a demographic dividend that's brimming with talent, potential and dedication. While about 40% of Saudi Arabia's population is under 25 years of age, in case of India it is even more – almost 50%!

There is much in common between the two countries. While India is developing smart cities, the Kingdom has its eyes set on Neom – the \$500 billion mega city, the Red Sea luxury resort project and the Haramain high-speed rail line. While Saudi Arabia is diversifying its economy beyond oil and increasing the contribution of the private sector as the main driver of economic growth, India ushered in new era of economic reforms and mega initiatives.

We will continue to draw upon our common heritage and shared interests.

9. What are the impediments if any?

There are no impediments. Our ties are time-tested and we have a strong civilizational bond and wide interests that our countries and two peoples share. The mutual respect and trust Saudi Arabia and India share has deepened with time and reflects in a host of gestures – such as hosting India as the guest of honour at our National Heritage Festival this year which was inaugurated by the Custodian of the

Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. The Kingdom's gesture of honouring

India is symbolic of its friendship with India. It was indeed heart-warming to see the India Pavilion at the festival highlighting the 'Make in India' initiative, based on the theme 'Saudi Ka Dost Bharat'.

GUEST COLUMN

President Trump, Iran and the Nuclear Deal

Sanjay Singh

US President Donald Trump has made no secret of his opposition to the P5+1 Agreement with Iran, called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). He has been very critical of this agreement, arrived at by his predecessor President Barack Obama in 2015 and has expressed concern that due to it Iran has enhanced its role as a "regional power". He feels that the agreement is seriously flawed and leaves pathways open for Iran to become a nuclear power. He is working towards dismantling it and in this he will now have the support of his national security team with the inclusion in it of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security A John R. Bolton, both strongly opposed to the agreement.

The differences on this deal are indicative of the divide in the American establishment on Iran. President Obama and his team, somewhat disdainful of Gulf Arabs, were hopeful that Iran, given incentives, could become part of the solution to the problems besetting the region.

They might have hoped that Iran and the US could eventually achieve a 'grand bargain' and settle all issues. Further, that Iran would perhaps reassume the

role it had under the Shah and play a helpful part in dealing with the strife, sectarian conflict, extremist and terrorist violence that are endemic to the region.

Bitter Memories

President Trump and his team belong to those in the US who believe that it is not possible for the US to do business with the present regime in Iran. They have not forgotten the indignities suffered by the US, a superpower, by the 444 day occupation of its embassy in Tehran or by the bombing of the US marine barracks in Beirut. They view Iran as the major member of the 'axis of evil' and lay at its door most of the blame for the problems and terrorist violence in the region. President Trump has identified the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, now viscerally opposed to Iran, for a special partnership and Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman as a favoured interlocuter. He and his national security team have exhibited great warmth for Israel and the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, another opponent of the Iran deal.

President Obama, unable to get the US Congress to rescind US sanctions against

Iran for its nuclear related activities, as part of the US commitment to the nuclear deal, agreed to continue waiving sanctions certifying that Iran was in compliance of the JCPOA. President Trump has continued to do so reluctantly.

While certifying Iranian compliance last on 12 January 2018, for another 120 days, he said that despite his disinclination he had not yet withdrawn the United States from the Iran nuclear deal but warned that either the deal's disastrous flaws are fixed, or the United States will withdraw. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in response had tweeted that the deal was not renegotiable. The US separately still maintains sanctions on Iran — independent of the nuclear deal — on matters such as terrorism, human rights and ballistic missile development, which rules out business activity by US firms in Iran.

The May Deadline

It is quite likely that President Trump may withdraw from the JCPOA in May and reimpose US nuclear-related sanctions. This by itself will not discomfit Iran much as it will not greatly change the existing situation. If, however, he also reimposes secondary sanctions targeting international trade with Iran, this will create a new set of difficulties for Iran. However, it is not likely to make Iran give up its pursuit of becoming a nuclear power and may push Iran into new alignments inimical to the

interests of the US. In this case, other countries including India will be forced to make a choice. European trade with Iran might collapse, leaving Iran with perhaps just China, Russia and a handful of other countries as its partners. While President Trump is determined to undo the nuclear deal, he may push Iran further into Chinese arms, who already have an overwhelming economic presence in the country. China is already Iran's largest economic partner, with large investments in its oil and gas sector, is the largest customer of Iran's energy exports and views Iran as an important constituent of its Belt and Road Initiative, providing China connectivity to the Levant and the Persian Gulf.

Iran's influence around the region was bolstered by the P5+1- Iran nuclear deal. This led to a realignment of its relations with major powers, removal of crippling sanctions and increased its economic heft. Its international trade was no longer constrained, it could access funds earlier blocked in the US and other countries and its oil production and exports burgeoned. The Russians, the Chinese and certain European countries started investing equities in Iran.

The arrangement which left Iran with nuclear capacity, which it could upgrade, is perceived as a threat by Israel and Iran's neighbours in the Gulf. Iran's increasing influence and support to its proxies in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen has alarmed the Saudis who are making all efforts to counter it. Iran itself has over-extended itself in trying to

expand its influence in the region to the cost of the domestic economy, consequently increasing the hardship faced by the people. Iranian currency is under pressure and has devalued considerably.

The agitations in Iran earlier this year could partly be attributed to these growing economic difficulties. All this has compelled President Rouhani to urgently try and address the problems the country faces and prepare for those on the horizon owing to possible US action. However, it needs to be borne in mind that the agitations were also political in nature and began in Mashad, the bastion of Ebrahim Raisi, President Rouhani's opponent in the last

Presidential elections. These developments are symptomatic of the jockeying for power in Iran and the positioning by different contending groups in anticipation of a post-Supreme Leader Khamenei Iran. The Regime 'liberals' which includes President Rouhani and his group, will be in competition with the more conservative anti-US groups including a majority of those in the Revolutionary Guards and the Clergy. The US would do well at this juncture not to become a football in Iran's domestic politics. But President Trump by walking out of the nuclear deal, will make it one.

(Sanjay Singh, former Secretary, Government of India.)

WEST ASIA NEWS SURVEY

POLITICAL

1. GCC to make Qatar an Island

MANAMA (9 April): A consortium of nine Saudi companies have proposed to construct a 60 km long, 200 m wide and 15 to 20 m deep canal costing SR 2.8 billion, on the Saudi-Qatar border extending from Salwa to Khor al Adeed. The canal will be fully funded by Saudi and UAE private investors and will be within Saudi territory.

The plan is to construct tourist resorts along the water way, even though its commercial feasibility remains to be proved. Besides, Saudi Arabia announced that it would convert part of Salwa on the Qatar border into a military base and nuclear burial site to handle waste from the first Saudi nuclear reactor with capacity of 17.6 GW to be set up by 2030.

Isolating Qatar by building a canal will have political implications as it might push Qatar further towards Iran and irk the quartet even more. – *Gulf News, Forbes, Gulf Business*

2. Kuwait Censures Manila

KUWAIT (23 April): Following a video of Philippines diplomatic staff engaged in rescuing Filipino maids from alleged exploitation in Kuwait, the Kuwaiti

deputy foreign minister Khalid Al Jarallah accused the Filipino embassy of violating Kuwait's sovereignty. He warned the Filipino ambassador to Kuwait Renato Villa, that such practices could harm relations between the two countries. Kuwaiti authorities arrested three Filipino suspects believed to have helped a housemaid escape from her sponsor's home. In response Foreign Secretary Alan Peter Cayetano apologized saying, "I apologize to my counterpart and we apologize to the Kuwaiti government, the Kuwaiti people and the leaders of Kuwait if they were offended by some actions taken by the Philippine embassy in Kuwait". – *The National, The Peninsular Qatar*

3. Tunisia Opens Consulate in Tripoli (Libya)

Tunis (21 April 2018): Tunisia has reopened its consulate in the Libyan capital, the foreign ministry of Libya said on Saturday, the latest mission to return to Tripoli. Although the Tunisian foreign ministry declined to comment over the information, a diplomatic source confirmed the move to the daily *Libyan Express*. The Tunisian mission was closed in 2015 after the kidnapping of ten staff members. Most embassies had left Tripoli in 2014 when violent conflict broke out between rival factions. But the improving

security situation and stability in Tripoli has allowed some Western countries to send their diplomats for longer stays to Tripoli. Italy, Turkey and the UN are

among the few to have opened their missions. — *Libyan Express*

4. UN says Russia's Eastern Ghouta Aid Plan Not Enough

Damascus (1 March): Russia opens a five hour ceasefire window every day in Eastern Ghouta to allow civilians to evacuate and let the humanitarian aid flow. The UN says that the window is not long enough to accomplish either goals. However, before the convoys are cleared to enter the enclave the government reportedly strips 70% of its medical supply and trauma kit. It also often keeps up its ground offensive while the convoy is delivering the aid, killing civilians in the process.

Residents have mocked the plan saying that theoretically it is in effect but in reality it does not really seem like there's been a ceasefire of any length at all. — *The New Arab and Al-Jazeera*

5. Israeli Group Seeks ICC Action Against Hamas

TEL AVIV (April 25): Israel's Shurat Hadin Israel Law Center has requested the International Criminal Court (ICC) to take action against Hamas over the use of children as human shields in the ongoing protests near the Israel-Gaza Strip border. According to Israel Hayom, "the lawsuit is based on a clause in the Rome Statute, the treaty that established the ICC's work, which says that recruiting children under the age of 15 to any militant organization is a war crime". The suit names former Hamas chief Khaled Mashaal, current deputy leader Saleh al-Arouri, and moneyman Zahar Jabarin as guilty of war crimes, saying that as all three are nationals of Jordan, which is a signatory to the Rome

Statute, they are subject to the court's jurisdiction. — *Israel Hayom*

6. US-Qatar Ties Strengthen as Qatari Emir Meets Trump

Washington (11 April): Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad al-Thani's visit to US has reportedly strengthened their bilateral relations. US President Donald Trump approved new arms sale to Qatar and described it as a "valued partner and a longtime friend". Both leaders discussed counter terrorism measures, military cooperation and recent developments in the region. US Secretary of Defense James Mattis praised Qatar's cooperation to regional security through information exchange and counter terrorism efforts while appreciating Qatar's support to the Al Udeid airbase. The US president said that "We are working on unity in that part of the Middle East and I think it's working out very well". Unity in GCC is important for the US as well as Gulf countries in order to counter the threat arising from Iran. Qatar-US relations are important in light of the upcoming US decision on JCPOA. — *Washington Post, Al Jazeera*

7. UAE Files a Complaint with ICAO Over Qatari Flight Interceptions

ABU DHABI (2 April): The UAE has filed a complaint with International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) over Qatari flight interceptions. Civil aviation authorities of the UAE and Bahrain have claimed that Qatari fighter jets recently flew dangerously close to two UAE Airbus-320, belonging to the Fujairah ruling family, while crossing the

Bahraini airspace. Bahrain's air surveillance intervened in time and the UAE civilian aircraft flew at a higher altitude of 35000 ft to avoid disruption. Saif Mohammed Al-Suwaidi, Director of the UAE's general civil aviation authority, called it a deliberate violation of international covenant and a threat to civil aviation.

The UAE said that it is not going to change its civilian flight paths due to such violations. In response Qatar accused a Bahrain warplane of violating its airspace and reported it to UNSC. Qatar has been isolated by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and UAE over allegations of harbouring terrorism. –*Arab News*

8. Saudi Crown Prince visits US, France, Spain

WASHINGTON (19 March): Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman visited the US to strengthen ties between the US and Saudi Arabia. He signed a defence deal worth \$200 billion and met a number of politicians, officials and media people, including the CIA director.

US companies promised to invest \$35 billion in Saudi Arabia. The visit was intended to showcase the changing face of Saudi Arabia to the West. The visit also symbolized the softening stand of Saudi Arabia towards Israel as the Crown Prince had conversation pertaining to peace in the Middle East with a number of Jewish leaders.

He also visited France and Spain and signed a number of MoUs on energy, agriculture, tourism, health and education. Saudi Aramco signed deals

worth \$10 billion. –*Arab News, Al Jazeera*

9. Arab League Meet at Dhahran

Dhahran (16 April): The Arab League summit 2018 or Jerusalem summit was held in Dhahran and its major focus was garnering support for Palestine issue, mechanisms to counter Iran and response to the prolonged crisis in Syria. King Salman who chaired the summit pledged \$ 150 million to the Islamic Endowment Support Program in Jerusalem and \$ 50 million to United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). Arab League leaders condemned the use of chemical weapons in Syria and called for an international investigation.

Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani did not attend the summit despite being invited. The Qatar News Agency later reported that the Qatari delegation would be headed by the country's permanent representative to the Arab League, Saif bin Muqaddam al-Buainain. Saudi top diplomat Adel al-Jubeir mentioned that the Qatar crisis was not addressed by the Arab League summit as a solution should be found within the framework of the GCC. However, on the sidelines of the summit, foreign ministers of the quartet – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE and Bahrain held a meeting in Riyadh and emphasized that Qatar must meet 13 demands to mend ties. –*Arab News, Middle East Confidential*

10. Erdogan Plans Curbs on the Internet

ANKARA (4 March): The Turkish parliament is considering a new law that would give the government the authority to [cancel Internet content on moral grounds](#). With Erdogan looking ahead to the upcoming presidential election, the move is viewed by some as an attempt to consolidate control over the last bit of media that could stir a problem for him. Meanwhile, Turkish opposition Republic People's Party held peaceful demonstrations across the country in opposition of the state of emergency that has been in place since the 2016 coup attempt. —*Al Ahval*

11. \$2 Billion in Aid for Yemen

GENEVA (3 April): At the recent [UN donor's conference](#) for Yemen, member-states pledged to secure more than \$2 billion to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in the country. Most of the aid is ensured by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who will contribute up to \$1 billion to help improve the situation of the war-afflicted Yemeni population. Additionally, the UAE has promised to fund \$50 million for the reconstruction of the al-Nuri Mosque which was built in the 12th century but was destroyed by ISIS in 2017.

Meanwhile, the UN decided to become [more stringent](#) about inspecting ships carrying humanitarian aid to screen weapons smuggling into Yemen. The move comes after both the parties blocked and attacked humanitarian aid ships from reaching Yemenis. Meanwhile, the [Legal Center for Rights](#)

[and Development](#) [human rights organization] in Yemen has filed a suit in a French court against the Saudi Crown Prince, alleging that his forces purposely commit atrocities against civilians. —*The Daily Star, Kayhan News*

12. Israel Suspends Relocation Deal for African Migrants

JERUSALEM (2 April 2018): The Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu suspended a fresh agreement with the UN refugee agency to relocate a huge number of African migrants, as the people from the Israeli right-wing compelled PM Netanyahu to [scrap the deal](#).

Just an hour after the announcement regarding the new agreement, Netanyahu posted on his Facebook page that he was keeping its implementation on hold until further review. He said, "I am attentive to you, especially to the residents of south Tel Aviv," adding "In the meantime I am suspending the agreement's implementation and after I meet with the representatives I will bring it forward for further review," . The issue of relocation of around 37,000 Africans in Israel, has created a moral dilemma to the basic character of Israeli State 'Jewish National Home'. According to the deal, around 16,250 of the 37,000 migrants would be relocated to [Western nations while others would](#) be permitted to live in Israel. — *Reuters*

13. Czech Republic May Open Consulate in Jerusalem

TEL AVIV (12 April): Acting Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis has told the media that his country is not likely to trail the US and would move its mission

to Jerusalem, but it will only open an honorary consulate there in the next few months. In March, *Channel 10* reported that Czech Republic is likely to shift its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, under Israeli pressure. The remark of the Czech Prime Minister highlighted his apprehensions and wariness regarding the decision of shifting the embassy to Jerusalem. It is important to note that during the UN General Assembly vote over Jerusalem late last year, Czech Republic abstained along with 34 countries.

14. Israel's New Ambassador Arrives in Jordan

TEL AVIV (16 April 2018): The new Israeli Ambassador, Amir Weisbird arrived in Amman on Monday to begin his tenure as ambassador to Jordan. He replaced Ambassador Einat Shlain, who left Jordan last July after a shooting incident in which an embassy security guard shot and killed two Jordanians after being stabbed in his apartment with a screwdriver. Later, Jordan was irate because the guard received a “hero's welcome” from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel.

In Jordan, the new Ambassador was welcomed with protests by Members of Parliament. Around 25 members of Jordan's 130-seat parliament signed a petition rejecting the scheduled return of the Israeli ambassador to Amman. — *Ynetnews*

15. Erdogan for Islamic Reforms

ANKARA (14 March): On the occasion of International Women's Day, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, while

referring to ultra conservative religious scholars, stated that they have no place in our times as they don't realize how Islam needs to be updated. He said, “You can't apply the practices applied 15 centuries ago today. Islam changes and adapts to the conditions of different ages. This is the beauty of Islam.” Observers claim that Erdogan is breaking the traditional mould of Turkish leadership by trying to control matters of religion. This might not appeal to the hard-line conservatives, many of whom are Erdogan supporters. — Al Monitor

16. EU to Offer Turkey More Cash for Syrian Refugees

ISTANBUL (14 March) — On the heels of the Bulgarian Summit, the European Union has decided to offer an additional \$3.7 billion funding for the accommodation of Syrian refugees living in Turkey. The EU's relations with Erdogan soured in recent years over various issues, including Turkey's failed bid to gain EU membership. The recent annual report of European signatories states that Turkey's is moving away from EU membership bid and is sliding towards authoritarianism, and the report hints at the state of emergency as problematic.

In response, Erdogan has said that Turkey is being treated unfairly in the EU progress report. Nonetheless, the EU depends on Turkey to keep a tight lid on immigration from the Middle East, where the war in Syria has killed thousands and displaced millions, many of whom are swarming regional and

Western countries, causing demographic imbalance. — *Daily Sabah, Daily Star*

SECURITY

17. Israel Holds Largest Joint Drills with US

TEL AVIV (9 March 2018): The US and Israel held a month-long joint military drill that simulates a missile attack on Tel Aviv. The drill was named 'Juniper Cobra 2018' and defined as the largest joint combat exercise between the two states.

Around "2,500 soldiers, including 1,400 marines and 1,100 naval personnel from the US European Command (USEUCOM), along with 2,000 Israeli Aerial Defence troops, logistics units and other Israel Defence Forces (IDF) units" took part in the exercise. The military drill came at a critical time when clouds of another armed conflict were circling both the countries. In the month of February relations between Israel and Lebanon deteriorated because of Israeli decision of construction of wall on Lebanon's southern border and eastern Mediterranean gas field. — *Middle East Monitor, Sputnik News*

18. Lebanon to Boost Army Presence on Southern Border

BEIRUT (15 March): At an international aid conference, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri unveiled his plan to deploy more Lebanese troops to the country's southern border with Israel.

Many Israeli observers considered this move as a provocative act. However, Hariri claims that he wants to deploy

troops to act as a buffer between Israel and Hezbollah in order to forestall the possibility of a war. At present, he is seeking more international aid in order to accomplish his plan. — *Jerusalem Post*

19. Turkey-Greece Ties Nosedive

ANKARA (20 April): Turkey recently blamed Greece for violating international law by refusing to hand over eight Turkish soldiers, who had fled the country for Athens after the 2016 coup attempt. Following this statement, a Turkish fighter jet was seen harassing the Chinook helicopter carrying Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and the Greek Armed Forces Chief Admiral Evangelos Apostolakis, while flying from the islet of Ro to Rhodes. On the other hand, Turkey also blamed US Pastor Andrew Brunson for aiding the 2016 coup attempt.

The two countries are also at odds over US support for YPG Kurdish militia in northern Syria, which Ankara considers a foreign terror outfit. — *Daily Sabah, Ekathimerini*

20. Saudi-Houthi Secret Talks

ADEN (15 March): Saudi Arabia and Houthi rebel leaders are reportedly holding "secret talks" through Oman over reaching a political settlement on the ongoing Yemen conflict, Reuters news agency claims. Both sides are reportedly interested in reaching "comprehensive agreement". The news has surprised experts as both sides did not seek to involve members of the

international community in their negotiations. Meanwhile, the new UN envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, is expected to participate in Yemeni peace negotiations, which are geared towards an initial ceasefire followed by a political process to form a new government in the country. — *Reuters*

21. US Still Pouring in Weapons into the Yemen War

WASHINGTON (8 March): The Pentagon has sold more than \$650 million worth of weapons to Saudi Arabia and the UAE in its ongoing military intervention in Yemen, says a report by Security Assistance Monitor programme of the US based think tank Center for International Policy. The report claims that the weapons were sent to Saudi Arabia and the UAE through the Department's Direct Commercial Sales. This program also permits US arms-makers to sell weapons directly to foreign customers. The US weapon contractors have sold \$610 million worth of precision-guided bombs, arms and ammunition to Saudi Arabia and another \$48.6 million of M-4 and M-16 automatic rifles and spare parts to UAE. Recently, the US Congress received detailed papers on direct US commercial weapon sales. However, only the cursory data was made public. Meanwhile, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif mocked US' "sheer hypocrisy" for seeking to stop Iran's defensive missile program while flooding the Middle East region with all kinds of weapons. — *Press TV, Security Assistance Monitor*

22. Bahrain Arrests Members of Iran Linked Terror Cell

DUBAI (3 March): Bahrain's interior ministry said that it had arrested 116 members of an Iran linked terror cell who were responsible for manufacturing, transporting and storing explosive materials. It claimed that 48 of them received training on explosives, artillery, and rocket-propelled grenades in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon. Bahraini police seized 42 kg of high explosives and 757 kg of explosive manufacturing materials besides several Kalashnikovs and grenades. Bahrain accused Iran's Revolutionary Guard of uniting several terrorist organizations under a single framework, training and funding terrorists, and providing them logistical support. On 1 March, the Secretary-General of the Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society and Gulf-European Center for Human Rights, Faisal Fulad informed Geneva about Tehran's funding of terror in Bahrain. —*Arab News, Arabian Business, Times of Israel*

23. Iran, Qatar Strengthen Defence Ties

TEHRAN (14 March): The Deputy Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Navy Rear Admiral Ali Reza Tangsiri has said that Iran stands with Qatar while heading the Iranian defence delegation to Middle East Naval Commander's conference (MENC) which is a key element of Doha International Maritime Defence Exhibition and Conference (DIMDEX). He said that "ground is

ready for development of co-operation with Qatar and we are doing our best to have stronger relations with Doha”.

Defying the June 2017 thirteen point demands of the quartet states, i.e., Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain and UAE, Iran and Qatar restored full diplomatic ties.

A month later, Iran and Qatar agreed to increase sea patrol in the Persian Gulf in the Fourth Round of border talks. The Commander of the Iranian Border Guards Brigadier General Qassem Rezayee and his Qatari counterpart Brigadier (Navy) Ali Ahmed al-Badeed, signed an agreement to continue mutual cooperation in the Gulf. As per the agreement, the border guards of both countries will exchange information, conduct sea patrols and solve problems of fishermen and sailors of both countries who enter territorial waters of the opposite side unknowingly. Perhaps, the quartet’s demand to sever ties with Iran has pushed Qatar further towards it.-*Arab News, Al Manar, Khaleej Times*

24. US, Saudi Arabia, UAE

Security Forum to Counter Iran

WASHINGTON (20 March): Saudi Arabia, UAE and US are launching a national security advisor level trilateral security forum to address Iran’s ‘malign activity’ in the region and other issues of strategic importance. The forum would engage monthly on issues such as unity among GCC countries, war in Yemen and US’ South Asia strategy.

A senior US official mentioned that Saudi Arabia’s security is a priority for the US as Congress has approved \$54 billion in arms sale to Saudi Arabia.

The Director of Arabia Foundation in Washington Firas Maksad, said that the US is looking for closer alliances in the Gulf. While making efforts to get closer to Gulf countries, the US is also countering Iran. The appointment of Mike Pompeo as Secretary of State is an important step towards reversing Barack Obama’s 2015 nuclear deal with Iran. – *Zawya, Arab News*

25. Work on Qatar’s Amphibious Ship Begins

DOHA (19 March): Italian shipbuilder Fincantieri has started working on Qatar’s seven vessels and showcased the design at DIMDEX 2018. Qatar signed an agreement worth \$6 billion in 2016 and ordered seven ships including one landing platform dock (LPD) amphibian ship, four 3000 ton corvettes and two 700 ton offshore patrol vehicles.

The LPD amphibian ship is the mother ship as it will provide long range target information for the four smaller corvettes. LPD and corvettes would have a 76 mm rapid fire main gun and Sylena Mk2 to defend against anti-ship missiles. In addition, the LPD will operate NH90 helicopters that can be armed with anti-ship missiles. These vessels will replace the nine Cold War era Qatar navy patrol boats and one LST. Delivery of these vessels, which will begin by 2021, would put Qatar in a stronger position among its neighbours with whom it has had a spat since June 2017. –*Defense News, The Drive, Al Jazeera*

26. Arms Race in GCC Crosses \$4 Billion in 2018

Doha (16 April): The arms race in GCC reached \$4.052 billion in 2018 with all countries except Bahrain, i.e., Saudi Arabia (\$3bn), Kuwait (\$300m), Qatar (\$490m), UAE (\$200m), Oman (\$60m), spending copious sums of money in defence purchases. Saudi Arabia signed defence deals with the US, UK and Spain while Qatar, Oman, UAE and Kuwait signed deals with the US.

Spanish state-owned ship builder, Navantia will sell five small warships to Saudi Arabia while the kingdom signed defence deals worth \$ 2.8 billion with the US since January 2018. In March, the US approved the sale of Advanced Precision Kill Weapon Systems II guidance sections to Qatar, King Air 350ER Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance aircraft to Kuwait, 300 AIM-Sidewinder Block II missiles, 40 AIM-9X-2 Sidewinder Captive Air Training Missiles and 30 tactical guidance units to the UAE. Meanwhile, in January, Oman requested Operational Flight Profile (OFP) software upgrades for its F-16 fleet, as well as an Identification Friend or Foe (IFF) surveillance system. –*Al Jazeera*

27. Syrian jihadists gang up against Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

DAMASCUS (1 March): There is a new permutation of forces within the Syrian rebel organizational chart. Two Islamist factions – Ahrar al-Sham and Zengi Brigade – have joined the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF) to take down Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

The decision comes in the wake of escalating tension between Free Syrian Army (FSA) and HTS in northern Syria. Ahrar al-Sham and the Zengi Brigade have been fighting against HTS, accusing them of failing to counter the regime's assault in Idlib. Prior to the unification, clashes erupted between HTS and Zengi Brigade – Ahrar al-Sham in November and August 2017. The rebels also attempted to resolve internal rifts amongst each other by mediation efforts, but persistently failed. – *Al Monitor, The New Arab*

28. Tribal Laws Determine Fate of IS Families in Iraq

BAGHDAD (1 March): Several Iraqi tribes have raised concerns about displaced civilians facing trouble in returning home for various political reasons. However, these tribes are also facing allegations of not allowing the families and associates of several ISIS fighters from returning to their tribal homes. It is likely that the current situation would subject families of ISIS fighters to face retributive violence by the people whose family members and tribesman were killed by ISIS. The Iraqi government has been keeping them in displacement camps for safety and protection. It is still unclear if the present condition will ever change. Amnesty International reports that women with ties to ISIS are being denied humanitarian aid and are being prevented from returning to their homes, with an alarming number of them being subjected to sexual violence. On the other hand, the Iraqi government

has announced the formation of an arbitration process to handle the disputes between Iraqi tribes. Many fear that it might elevate tribal law above the Iraqi state and civil legal process. — *Al Monitor, Iraq Business News*

29. US Senators Introduce Yemen War Resolution

WASHINGTON (1 March): At a press conference, US Senators Bernie Sanders, Mike Lee and Chris Murphy announced that they will soon introduce a resolution that will put an end to US' logistical and other support for Saudi Arabia and UAE in their on-going intervention in Yemen. The bipartisan resolution will invoke the 1973 War Power Act under which the US President has to seek congressional approval for any deployment of US armed forces into combat.

It is likely that once Senate approves this resolution, it will impact US military operations in combat zones ranging from Syria to the African region. Meanwhile, the State Department and Defense Department faced heavy criticism on US aid for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee [SFRC]. The Congressional Research Service helped SFRC by producing a special report on the situation in Yemen. — *Haaretz*

30. Turkey, Iraq Spar Over ISIS Families

VIENNA (8 March): The Turkish military is planning to conduct a joint operation with the Iraqi forces against

PKK fighters in northern Iraq. However, Bagdad has not given a green signal yet. This is because Iraq and Turkey have been at odds over the Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum. Their relations have soured over the treatment of alleged ISIS members, many of whom were Turkish nationals, particularly women married to ISIS fighters. On the other hand, Iraq is already struggling on how to deal with child soldiers who were forcibly recruited by ISIS. According to multiple reports, hundreds of children have been estimated to be used by ISIS, including children who joined with their families and the offspring of foreign fighters groomed from birth to perpetuate their ideology.

Various experts have warned Iraq over the threat posed to security due to these indoctrinated children. Treating children's belonging to Yazidi community, who were segregated from the families and in many cases orphaned, is another challenge for the Iraqi government. Moreover, the Iraqi legal system allows criminal prosecution of defendants who are as young as nine years old. So far, Iraqi authorities have been putting these child soldiers on trial rather than putting them in rehabilitation programs. — *Al Monitor, Hurriyet*

31. Hezbollah Says Not Expecting War with Israel

TEL AVIV (13 March): A senior leader of Iran-backed Hezbollah said that they are not expecting war with Israel, but it was prepared to face any Israel attack. "We have declared repeatedly and frequently that we, as the resistance, work to have

permanent readiness and we are ready to confront the Israeli aggression if it happens, and therefore we are ready to defend ourselves by all available means," said deputy Hezbollah leader Sheikh Naim Qassem.

Qassem's remark come at a crucial time when many newspapers reported that Hezbollah had declared a state of emergency, fearing an Israeli attack. — *Israel National News*

32. Palestinian PM Survives Gaza Assassination Attempt

TEL AVIV (14 March): Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah and General Majid Faraj, the head of the Palestinian Authority's intelligence services, survived a failed assassination attempt made by unidentified assassins.

The attempt was made when the Palestinian PM was visiting Gaza to inaugurate a new water treatment facility.

Although Hamdallah said the unfortunate incident would not deter him from forging unity and reconciliation with Hamas, many security experts have said that the assassination attempt may adversely impact Egypt-led reconciliation efforts between Hamas and Fatah. — *Haaretz*

33. Israel Rejects UN, EU Call for Probe into Gaza Deaths

TEL AVIV (3 April): Israeli Defence Minister Avigdor Liberman has refused the call of the United Nations and European Union to set up an inquiry into the killing of many Palestinians by the IDF during demonstrations on the Gaza frontier. He noted that the soldiers "did what had to be done" to respond to a violent protest. He further noted that

"Israeli soldiers did what was necessary. I think all our soldiers deserve a medal". "As for a commission of inquiry — there won't be one," he added. — *DW.com, The Guardian*

ECONOMIC

34 Harsh Austerity Measures Only Option Left for Jordan's Economy

AMMAN (13 April): The Jordanian economy is going through its worse time. Its current budget deficit is \$700bn. Public debt stands at \$40b which is equivalent to around 95% of its GDP and one- third of the population lives under the poverty line. Under such conditions, the kingdom has no choice but to embark on austerity measures. But it is also not easy, as "an inflationary increase of up to 100% on some of the basic food items has triggered a public backlash". According to experts, the current situation in Jordan shows that civilians have given up all hope in their government's ability to improve the economy. — Press TV

35. Jordan, Egypt sign FTA

RIYADH (12 April) — Jordan and Egypt signed an agreement for free trade and commerce within the services domain on the sideline of the 29th Arab Summit's meeting for Ministers of Economy and Social Affairs. By signing the agreement now Jordan and Egypt have joined the group of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Oman, Morocco, Lebanon, Sudan, Yemen, Jordan in the agreement. Assistant Undersecretary for Economic Affairs, the Arab League, Kamal Ali said that the agreement was part of the grand Arab free-trade zone, adding that it would open the gates for investments

within the services domain for those agreeing to the deal. The deal will gradually improve commerce within the services domain amongst members in the upcoming 12 years, said the official. - *KUNA*

36. Jordan's Aqaba Port Operational this Month

AMMAN (27 March): Jordan's new port at Aqaba will be functional in May, according to authorities of the Special Economic Zone Aseza. The port is strategically important for Jordan because of its location on the Red Sea. According to Aseza chief Nasser Shraideh, "the new port represents a leap forward in terms of the quality, versatility and speed of cargo movement, allowing the country to compete with other major Red Sea ports". The port construction project was worth \$250m focusing on the construction of 12 terminals capable of handling various kinds of liquids "including oil and the doubling of the capacity of the grain silos to 16,000 tonnes". On the other hand, the old port will be transformed into a tourist and cultural site by UAE's Company Marsa Zayed. The authorities are expecting that it will attract nearly a \$25 billion investment by the end of 2025. The full functioning of the port will help Jordan to deal with the difficult economic situation as well. — *ANSAMED*

37. More Oil Explored in Egypt

CAIRO (24 April): SDX Energy has announced one more new discovery.

The Well was drilled down to 5,250 feet and encountered 43 feet of net heavy oil pay, across the Yusr and Bakr

formations. The company said the average porosity measured 16%.

Further evaluation of the discovery is ongoing, after which the company expects the Well to be completed as a producer and be connected to the central processing facilities at Meseda.

While commenting on the exploration SDX Energy chief executive Paul Welch noted: "We are pleased with the result at Rabul 4, which completes the initial development of the structure that we discovered in October of 2017. The four successful Wells drilled to date in the Rabul structure will contribute significantly to our production volumes in 2018." — SDX Energy

38. Iraq's 2018 Budget Passed, Angers Kurds

BAGHDAD (March 2): The Iraqi parliament passed its budget and not everybody is satisfied with it. The Kurds expressed their resentment over the reduction of their allocation from 17% to 12.67%. Moreover, the budget did not have an accurate amount for Kurdistan saying it would get a portion based on their population. In the budget, it was also underlined that if the Kurds did not export their share of oil then the allocation would be further reduced. Previously, Kurds boycotted the parliament budget session and debated over these points. The Kurds urged President Masum to veto the budget, while others have threatened a lawsuit.

Popular Mobilization Unit leaders also complained as the budget does not compensate their forces as compared to the regular Iraqi army unit. This led Iraqi PM Haider al-Abadi to issue a decree to formally assimilate the PMU into the Iraqi armed forces, with equal pay and responsibility. Abadi has been

delaying this process fearing the US reactions. But with the election approaching, Abadi had to change his tune to secure PMU's support to seek victory. — *The Baghdad Post, Iraqi Civil Society*

39. Iran Signs Contract with Russia on Two Oil Fields

TEHRAN (16 March) Iran has managed to secure a second contract after signing up with Total and CNPC for South Pars Phase 11 in June 2011. Russian firm Zarubezhneft has signed a contract to develop two oil fields for Iran in West Paydar and Aban, partnered by domestic firm, Dana Energy.

The Russian firm will reportedly increase the production from 36,000 b/d to 48,000 b/d during the 10-year contract. The contract is for \$742m. — *MEES*

40. Iraq Eyes 70,000 B/D Refinery Boost by End of 2018

BAGHDAD (6 APRIL): Post Islamic State, Iraq is trying to keep up with the demand for its refined oil products. Iraq is planning to upgrade its Basra refinery. This will boost Iraq's federal refining capacity by more than 10% by the end of 2018. Iraq's oil ministry announced on 4 April that a fourth 70,000 b/d crude distillation unit at the refinery is due online by end-2018, taking the plant's capacity to 280,000 b/d. Meanwhile, Iraqi's sales gas volume hit a new record of 1.3bn cfd in January. Although January's total gas production was slightly below December's monthly record of 2.843bn cfd, the reduced flaring is a result of increasing associated gas recovery from the Rumaila, West Qurna-1 and Zubair

oilfields by the Basrah Gas Company (BGC). Fuel oil supplies are rallying as damaged refineries are repaired. — *MEES*

41. KRG Eyes Major Support for Future Output Gains

ERBIL (23 March): Ali Nazir al-Shatari, Deputy Director General of Iraqi state oil marketer Somo says "his organization is ready to market Kirkuk oil if Baghdad resumes piped exports to Turkey's Ceyhan through the KRG's export link. But, he says that all Iraqi crude sold via Turkey must be marketed by Somo, and that there cannot be a return to the situation where the KRG marketed its output, and Somo marketed North Oil Company's production." According to the Middle East business analysis magazine MEES, the decision is not up to Somo, should Baghdad and Erbil come to an agreement whereby NOC can export via the KRG's pipeline. But if the KRG continues to independently market its crude, then Somo will have little option. However, Iraqi PM Haider al-Abadi says that a preliminary agreement has been reached with KRG to export oil through the autonomous region's 700,000 b/d pipeline to Turkey. This raises the prospect of an end to the shut-in of 280,000 b/d of Kirkuk crude. On the other hand, despite the ongoing uncertainty in Erbil and Baghdad, IOC is planning to advance with their investing. According to MEES report, Bawi asset (100%) contains a "Jurassic oil reservoir [that] can be developed entirely separately to gas." This potentially paves

the way for expedited stand-alone development of the field's 37mn barrels (2C) oil reserves. — MEES

42. Qatar Airways to Add 11 New Fleets in 2018

DOHA (4 April): Qatar airways is to expand its fleet by adding 11 new fleets this year. Qatar Airways Group Chief Executive Akbar Al Baker announced at a press conference on the sidelines of the 31st edition of IATA Ground Handling Services that the airways is to launch 16 new destinations in 2018 and 2019. The new destinations include London Gatwick and Cardiff (United Kingdom); Lisbon (Portugal); Tallinn (Estonia); Valletta (Malta); Langkawi (Malaysia); Da Nang (Vietnam); Bodrum and Antalya (Turkey); Mykonos (Greece) and Málaga (Spain).

Qatari Minister of Transport and Communications, H E Jassim bin Saif Al Sulaiti mentioned that hosting IATA Ground Handling Services conference signifies that Qatar still enjoys confidence in the region.

The conference was organized at Doha Sheraton resort and convention hotel and more than 700 international delegates from more than twelve countries participated in it. — *The Peninsular Qatar*

43. UAE, Egypt Explore Cooperation in 13 Sectors

CAIRO (17 March): UAE-Egypt Economic Committee meeting was held at Cairo in the presence of Sultan Bin Saeed Al Mansouri, Minister of Economy, UAE, and Egypt's Trade

Minister, Tarek Kabil. The committee reviewed the prospects of cooperation in 13 developmental sectors — including industry, trade, customs, technology, tourism, finance, metrology, electricity, renewable energy, water resources, transport and aviation.

The meeting was also attended by a number of businessmen and investors from both the countries. UAE is among the top trading partners of Egypt. On the sidelines of this meeting, UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan mentioned that UAE and Egypt face challenges against Iran, Israel and Turkey for their aggression on Arab territories. — *Gulf News, Arab News*

44. Bahrain Finds Largest Oil Reserve Since 1932

MANAMA (2 April): Bahrain announced its largest discovery of oil since 1932 in Khaleej al Bahrain basin with potential of around \$80 million of tight oil. The country is the smallest producer of hydrocarbons in GCC with oil producing capacity of 50,000 barrels per day and one billion cubic feet of natural gas per day. In addition, a separate natural gas reserve of 13.7 trillion cubic feet (tcf) has been found below Bahrain's main gas reservoir. The new find is located close to the existing oil fields, which reduces the cost of extraction, though due to geological challenges it is difficult to extract. Agreements have been made with oil field services of Halliburton for the commercial extraction of oil. The discovery comes at a time when Bahrain

is dependent on other GCC countries for sustaining its economy. –*The National*

45. GCC Companies to Go Public: MARKAZ

KUWAIT (7 March): Kuwait Financial Centre (MARKAZ) reported in its monthly market report that Saudi Arabia and UAE are to see enhanced IPO activity and nearly 30 GCC companies are expected to go public. This is in keeping with the 2017 trend which saw seventeen issues raising \$ 2.95 billion. Initial public offerings are making a comeback as slowdown in economic growth forced companies to rethink about raising funds for sale of shares as it might not bring proper returns and valuations for their businesses.

Saudi approval of a new bankruptcy law that provides foreign investors with a legal vehicle to recoup assets in cases of solvency, opened the way for more interest in equity markets. –*AME Info, MARKAZ*

46. Saudi Privatization Program Gets Green Light

RIYADH (25 April): Saudi Arabia's Council of Economic and Development Affairs headed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman approved the Saudi privatization programme aimed at increasing job opportunities, attracting latest technologies and innovations and boosting economic development. It will enhance local and foreign investment while resting supervisory and regulatory role to public and government entities. It aims at increasing private sector

contribution to GDP from 40 to 65 % by 2030. Investment will be sought in establishing new schools, universities and health centres. The programme which is part of vision 2030 sets out three objectives: Developing a general legal framework for policies related to privatization; establishing organizational foundations and dedicated institutions to execute the policies; and setting a timescale for their delivery. –*Arab News*

INDIA AND THE REGION

46. President Hosts King of Jordan

NEW DELHI (2 March): Jordanian King Abdullah II Ibn Al Hussein visited India on 1 March 2018 and was received by The President of India, Ram Nath Kovind, at Rashtrapati Bhavan.

In the welcome note to the King Abdullah II Ibn Al Hussein, the President said that “Jordan has remained stable and peaceful in a troubled region. This has been possible because of the stellar and visionary leadership of King Abdullah II. India deeply appreciates the lead he has taken [in] tackling radicalisation through the Aqaba process. The President stated that terrorism is challenging us on a daily basis. Therefore, we need to work together to defeat it”.

The President highlighted the importance of India's relations with Jordan and said that our phosphate related joint ventures are doing well. He emphasized that there is huge

opportunity to augment trade and investment between the two, particularly in the fields of IT, infrastructure, pharma and tourism. — *Press Information Bureau*

47. India, Jordan Ink 12

Pacts; One on Defence Cooperation

NEW DELHI (1 March 2018): India and Jordan have decided to setup defence cooperation between the two countries, to fight terrorism and prevent cyber security crimes.

The decision was taken in a meeting that was held in New Delhi between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Jordanian King Abdullah II to discuss the key strategic issues and made it clear “that terrorism and radicalization are not linked to any religion”.

During the meeting, the two leaders discussed a wide range of issues starting from Syrian problem to Palestine issue. After extensive discussion, the two sides inked 12 agreements comprising the areas related to “defence, health and medicine, setting up of the next generation Centre of Excellence (COE) in Jordan, long-term supply of rock phosphate and fertiliser and setting up of setting up of a Hindi Chair at the Jordan University”. During the visit, the Jordanian king also visited the National Security Guard (NSG) training camp, where he was shown the special combat skills of the NSG. The positive responses from both the leaders have raised the possibility of a wider India-Jordan collaboration. — *PTI*

48. Egyptian Foreign Minister Visits India

NEW DELHI (23 March): The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Arab Republic of Egypt, H.E. Sameh Shoukry paid a visit to India from March 22-23, 2018. During his visit, the 7th Session of India-Egypt Joint Commission Meeting was held on March 23, 2018 in New Delhi. External Affairs Minister Smt. Sushma Swaraj led the Indian side and both leaders had intense discussions over a wide range of bilateral issues and to find possible ways to deepen and expand bilateral cooperation between the countries.

The important regional, international and multilateral issues affecting both the countries were also discussed. H.E. Shoukry also “called on the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi and handed over a letter to him from the President of Egypt H.E. Mr. Abdel Fattah El-Sisi”. — *Ministry of External Affairs*

49. Good Conduct

Certificate for UAE Visa Suspended

ABU DHABI (1 April): From April 1, the UAE’s Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization postponed the good conduct certificate requirement for visa processing. It was made a mandatory condition for the employment visa from 4 February . On 29 March, UAE’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MoFA) informed the embassies and consulates across the UAE about the non-requirement of the good conduct certificate. The Philippine Consul

General to Dubai welcomed the decision while the Indian ambassador to the UAE Navdeep Singh Suri, said it was a great development. "(It) will remove the uncertainties that had emerged since the requirement for a Good Conduct Certificate was introduced in February. We continue to work closely with our friends in the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization to ensure a streamlined and orderly process for recruitment of Indian workers and professionals into UAE." India receives more than US \$ 8 million as remittances from Gulf countries. — *Gulf News, Khaleej Times*

50. Tax on Expat Money Transfers Might Become Reality in Kuwait

KUWAIT (25 March): The Kuwait National Assembly's financial and economic affairs committee intends to impose taxes on money transfer by expatriates despite financial and legislative restrictions. MP Safa al Hashem submitted a proposal to impose a 5% tax on any money transfer by expatriates though the Kuwait Central Bank. In this context, the Kuwait Central Bank noted that the proposal to impose 5% tax is a counterproductive move as it will boost black market dealings. On the other hand, the legal and legislative committee, labelled this move as discriminatory as it does not apply to citizens. None of the other GCC countries tax expat money transfers. The head of financial and economic affairs committee Salah Khorshid said that if

implemented, it will add KD 50-60 billion to state coffers. This move is a part of Kuwaiti effort to stabilize its economy since oil price drop of 2014. Kuwait has imposed several fees on expatriates including hiking electricity, water and medical charges.

Taxation on expat money can affect Indian economy as amount of remittances ought to go down and illegal means of money transfer may abound. 0.9 Million Indians work in Kuwait and in 2016 India received \$ 4.173 billion as remittance from Kuwait.- *Kuwait Times*

51. GCC States Plan a Company for Direct Money Transfer

RIYADH (13 March): GCC countries plan a company for direct money transfer among member countries without relying on foreign currencies like the US dollar. All GCC countries including Qatar has agreed to provide the initial capital after which the company will have to borrow from the Gulf market or use the initial generated capital.

The company will be based in Riyadh with secondary office in UAE and central bank governors of six GCC countries will be members of the board. In December, UAE's Central Bank Governor Mubarak Rashed al-Mansouri confirmed plans to issue a digital currency for cross border transaction with Saudi Arabia.

Name of the proposed company and CEO are yet to be confirmed while it is expected that it will start functioning in second half of 2018. — *Gulf Business, International Investment*

52. Indian Oil Company Gets 17% stake in Oman oil field

MUSCAT (7 April): Indian Oil Corporation Limited (IOCL) acquired 17 % participating interest in Mukhaizna oil field of Oman by acquiring 100 % equity stake in Shell Exploration & Production Oman Ltd. IOCL mentioned in a filing to the Bombay stock exchange that it transacted for a value of \$ 329 million. This is IOCL's first acquisition in Oman and is done through its wholly owned subsidiary in Oman IOCL Singapore Pte Limited. Mukhaizna oil field I operated by Occidental Mukhaizna, Oman Oil Company, Liwa Energy Limited, Total E&P Oman, and Partex Oman corporation. Mukhaizna is the largest individual oilfield in Oman with production capacity of 120,000 barrels per day contributing about 13 % of total Omani crude production. Indian oil said that this acquisition will augment India's energy security as well as enhance India's stature in the global political and economic arena. - *Muscat Daily, Forbes Middle East*

Indian Ambassadors to Turkey and Egypt

NEW DELHI (19 April): Mr. Sanjay Bhattacharya, presently Ambassador of India to the Arab Republic of Egypt has been appointed as the next Ambassador of India to the Republic of Turkey. Meanwhile, Mr Rahul Kulshreshth, current Ambassador of India to the Republic of Turkey will be the next Ambassador of India to the Republic of Egypt. Both of them are expected to take

up their respective assignments soon. — *Ministry of External Affairs*

Oman-India Sports Meet to Boost Ties

MUSCAT (21April): The Indian Embassy in Oman is organizing, the 2018 Oman-India Sports Meet, in collaboration with the Indian Social Club's (ISC) Malayalam Wing and the Sultanate's Ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs, to commemorate 70 years of Indian independence. The six-month-long sports festival will start on 4 May, will see teams from both nations compete in six sports: football, volleyball, cricket, hockey, badminton and athletics. The event will register the participation of nearly 15,000 athletes from India and Oman to strengthen the bilateral ties between the two countries. — *Times of Oman*

(Prepared by Jatin Kumar, Lakshmi Priya and Nagapushpa Devendra)

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