

CONFERENCE ON

# CONFRONTATIONS AND CONFLICTS IN WEST ASIA: CHALLENGES FOR INDIA

15 JANUARY 2016



AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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### About Ananta Centre

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An independent organization, Ananta Centre is registered under the Indian Trust Act. It focuses on leadership development and encourages frank and open dialogue on the most important issues facing Indian society, to help foster its transformation. The Centre also engages civil society, business, governments and other key stakeholders on issues of importance to India's development, foreign policy, strategic affairs and national security.

The Centre serves as a convening body for exchange of ideas, broadening perspectives and enhancing capacity to create sustainable solutions on a wide variety of issues.

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## 1.

### Key Themes

- *Overview of the West Asian Scenario*
- *The Saudi-Iran Confrontation and Proxy Wars in West Asia*
- *The proliferation of Jihad in West Asia*
- *Role of the Regional and Big Powers in the West Asian Conflicts*
- *Challenges for India—Shaping Collective Security Arrangements in West Asia*

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## 2.

### Introduction

West Asia has experienced a large number of conflicts and grave internal instability since World War II. However, since the commencement of the Arab Spring five years ago, the region has been in the throes of serious confrontations and war that led to the collapse of state order in some countries and unleashed forces of extremism that threaten regional stability.

Saudi Arabia has been seeing the regional strategic scenario deteriorate to its disadvantage ever since the US occupation of Iraq in 2003 commenced the era of “Shia empowerment”, which in the Saudi view opened the doors to the expansion of Iranian influence into one more Arab country, this time one with which the Kingdom shares an 800 km border and which till recently had been a bulwark against the spread of Iranian power in the region. But, it was the events surrounding the Arab Spring that caused Saudi Arabia the deepest concern: the fall of Hosni Mubarak deprived it of a crucial strategic partner in its confrontation with Iran, while the agitation for political reform in Bahrain (which would inevitably advantage the majority Shia community in the country) suggested a further expansion of Iranian influence, this time within the family of the Gulf Cooperation Council [GCC] itself.

In response to these challenges, which the Kingdom viewed as “existential”, Saudi Arabia abandoned its traditional policies of moderation, accommodation and behind-the-scenes diplomacy, and opted to directly confront Iran in different West Asian theatres. Commencing with its military intervention in Bahrain to end the demand for reform, it then entered Syria to effect

regime change, first, by backing the “secular” Free Syrian Army, and then, when this proved unsuccessful, supporting Salafi militia, and later even taking the help of the Al Qaeda-affiliated force, Jabhat Nusra.

From March 2015, Saudi Arabia commenced a military assault on Yemen in response to the attempts of the Houthis to establish their authority over the country by displacing the Saudi-backed government of President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who had come to power, in a GCC-supported arrangement, in place of Ali Abdullah Saleh who had ruled the country for over 30 years. The Kingdom viewed the Houthis as surrogates of Iran (due to their being Zaidis, a Shia sect), and saw in their political and military expansion one more instance of Iranian aggrandizement in the region.

Though Saudi concerns relating to Iran are primarily of a strategic character, it has shaped its domestic and regional mobilisations against Iran on sectarian basis, demonizing Iran for its attempts to spread its sectarian and hegemonic interests in West Asia by “interfering” in the domestic affairs of the neighbouring Arab countries. As of now, though the conflicts in Syria and Yemen have wreaked extraordinary destruction and loss of life, they have not yielded the desired results for Saudi Arabia. To complicate the picture for the Saudis, its traditional strategic partner, the US, has engaged with Iran to address and resolve the long-standing nuclear issue and has also conveyed a reluctance to be involved militarily in West Asian disputes, opting instead for a “pivot” to East Asia to balance the expansion of Chinese influence in the region.

The young Defense Minister and Deputy Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who is today wielding considerable political and economic influence in the country has articulated his country's approach to foreign policy in the shape of the so-called "Salman Doctrine", named after his father. In terms of this doctrine, Saudi Arabia will pursue its own interests without necessarily depending on US support. His muscular approach is manifested in the unilateral declaration of the formation of 34 Sunni countries into an anti- terrorism coalition, which was openly disputed by Pakistan and Malaysia.

Amidst the ongoing conflicts, the scourge of jihad has obtained a fresh resonance, benefitting from the breakdown of central authority in different states. Today, not only has Al-Qaeda been rejuvenated, we also see the expanding power and influence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Having its roots in the Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), headed by Abu Musab Zarqawi, which fought the US occupation and the Shia community with equal fervour, the ISIS under its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, dramatically captured large swathes of Iraqi and Syrian territory and proclaimed the Islamic State as a "Caliphate" in July 2014. It is now a proto-state, with a defined central and provincial leadership, armed force, finances, local security forces, and the capacity to deliver municipal services. Through the deft use of social media it has been able to recruit thousands of young jihadis from the Arab world and even western countries. Its influence has rapidly spread across north Africa, even as it is making inroads among jihadi groups traditionally affiliated with Al Qaeda.

## Role of External Powers

The region has always been attracting attention of regional power for supremacy and extra-regional powers for influence. In the present situation the major powers seem to be floundering over a clear policy in the region.

**The United States**, which previously played an active military interventionist role, has failed to clearly lay out its agenda for West Asia. In the wake of the Iran nuclear deal, it has redefined its relationship with other powers in the region like Iran and Saudi Arabia. US's 'pivot to Asia' reflects that US is more concerned about curtailing the rise of China than get distracted by conflicts in West Asia. Arab uprising has hastened the decline of US influence in the region. There is now US fatigue of the region and the regional fatigue of the United States. However, US will remain involved in the region in one way or the other in managing developments in the region especially if it is likely to impact its own national interest. It has various fleets in the region and is the sole global power capable of projecting force effectively in West Asia.

**Russia**, a non-player so far in the politics of West Asia, has now emerged as a political and military participant in the region. Russia's is of course concerned that a few thousand Chechens are fighting for the ISIS. However, its interests go beyond this: by getting involved militarily in Syria, Russia wants to preserve and protect its geopolitical interests and elevate its global standing.

Despite being a major economic power in the region,

**Turkey** has in recent times not played a political role in the region. When AKP came to power in 2002, Turkey set upon its path of domestic and economic consolidation. The Arab Spring presented it with the opportunity to promote the Turkish model of Islamic democracy. However, its forays into West Asian affairs have not met with much success. Its Islamist agenda, and specifically its support for the Muslim Brotherhood, was not viewed favourably by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Again, in association with Qatar, it invested a lot in a quick regime change in Damascus, but was not successful; now, with the Russian support for the Assad regime, this prospect is even more remote, and Turkey has had to cede the lead role in Syria to Saudi Arabia. More seriously, Kurdish success in Syria in setting up their own autonomous enclave at the Syrian-Turkish border, has alarmed the Turkish government and has ignited a new round of acrimony and conflict with the Kurds at home.

Though **Egypt** has stabilized under al-Sisi it will continue to face enormous difficulties in handling its economic problems, compounded by a fast growing population and increasing water shortages. Further, even though he has succeeded in marginalizing Muslim Brotherhood, he may not succeed in eliminating it. As a result, Egypt's role in solving pan-Arab issues will remain diminished.

**Israel** is militarily the strongest power in the region, with an advanced economy and technological prowess. It has considerable intelligence capabilities but the Palestinian issue continues to remain its Achilles heel.

The rise of **China** and the requirements of the second largest economy in the world and its efforts towards acquisition of "Comprehensive National Power" (CNP) have led to increasing domestic demand for resources and energy imports, thus increasing its dependence on West Asian supplies. Its Silk Road initiative, the OBOR and China-Pakistan economic corridor initiative, give the Gulf region a central place. For this, China needs stability in the region and it does not want to depend on the Malacca and other straits which make the Chinese supply lines vulnerable to external threats. The other two major Asian economies, Japan and South Korea, cannot remain aloof from West Asia either, given their huge energy dependency on the region.

On the one hand, owing to the failure of the US in the region and shift in the economic power center from the West to East, the region is building ties with a host of alternatives, especially in Asia. The region's ties with the United States are no longer exclusive. On the other hand, major Asian economies have collectively become the largest buyer of hydrocarbons from the gulf region; this dependence is projected to become even larger as the USA's and west's requirement of hydrocarbons from the gulf region continue to diminish. Rapidly growing trade between the Gulf region and the rest of Asia is poised to overtake trade between the gulf region and the western world within the next few months.

Stronger strategic synergies in the energy and economic domain between countries of the gulf and the Indo-Pacific are making the gulf region an integral part of the unfolding Asian growth story. This is a strategic factor of

growing importance for the gulf as peace and stability in the region are becoming factors of increasing strategic and even existential significance for the major Asian countries. It is in this context that some Asian scholars have been pushing the idea of upgrading West Asia—Asia's buyer-seller relationship into a strategic one and explore the possibility of a new collective security architecture which would involve both Asian and Western powers including the United States. However, Asian powers will have to stop riding piggyback on US naval presence in the region and start finding their own means of securing their sea lanes.

The confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia presents a diplomatic dilemma for India which is a friend to both the countries. Whatever happens between Riyadh and Tehran would have serious implications for the millions of Indians who live and work in the Gulf region. In this context, managing India's relations with both the countries at a time when their differences are sharpening is going to be difficult. The region is important for India particularly for energy security; 80 percent of our imports come from here and this is likely to grow to 90. This demand is to sustain high growth rates which cannot be maintained without a steady supply of energy. We have substantial investments and joint venture arrangements in the region. In the future the principle funding from abroad for the development of India's infrastructure, industry and energy potential will be from the gulf. We have an eight million-strong community settled in west Asia and there is a great vote in favor of India as a preferred community.

The end of every decade has shown an exponential increase in the presence of our community, a trend which is likely to continue. Apart from the economic and strategic significance of the region in India's growth story, the region is of consequence for domestic stability. There are concerns about the spill-over effect of jihad and terrorism from this region, all of which will have negative consequences for us. Given India's interests in the region it is suggested that India should work collectively with other countries towards a new security arrangement. The initiative should come from Asia, with India taking the lead but working in tandem with other Asian countries. Asian countries are tremendously dependent on the energy resources and the economic connectivity with West Asia.



### 3.

## Recommendations

1. The region is witnessing the breakdown of the old order whilst the new order is still in formation. One of the key developments is the change in the US policy towards the region, especially after the signing of the nuclear deal with Iran. Other significant features include Russia's assertive role to protect its interest in the region, Iran's increasing influence, Turkey's role in the region and its misadventure in the Syrian conflict and the recent flare-up in Saudi-Iran tensions in the aftermath of the execution of a number of prisoners, including the Shia cleric, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr.
  2. India's focus should be on strengthening of the bilateral, political, and economic and security ties with the countries of the region. The region wants to engage Asian countries and we need to take advantage of this by upgrading our bilateral relations with the stable states. This would entail diversifying our relations and looking beyond existing linkages, which are primarily in the energy trade.
  3. Rejuvenation of Al Qaeda and emergence of ISIS are manifestations of spread of jihad in the region which is affecting to the rest of the world and mobilizing the youth through new technologies like social media. A pluralistic society like India needs to immunize its borders from such radicalism.
  4. The eight million-strong Indian community settled in West Asia remains vulnerable in the light of various crises. There is a need for India to devise a viable plan to ensure their safety and security.
  5. India should utilize this opportunity to attract investments from the Middle East.
  6. With respect to Syria, India needs to play a more active role in brokering a peace process between the contesting powers.
  7. A **new cooperative security framework** is necessary to replace the crumbling order in West Asia. Asian countries must be an integral and prominent component of any new arrangement. In order to do this, Asian powers will have to stop riding piggyback on US naval presence in the region and start finding their own means of securing their sea lanes.
- The collective security initiative must have three attributes.
- a) it should be **diplomatic**: it does not envisage any military role for any of the participants in the promotion of the initiatives
  - b) it should be **inclusive**: all the interested parties must be a part of it
  - c) it should be **incremental**: it must be recognized that any arrangement will take time to take shape and to build a sense of mutual comfort and trust. There is a certain mechanics of how to proceed with this initiative and in this regard we see a central role for India and China working together. This will create a formidable presence both in terms of the political respect both enjoy and the economic clout that they bring to bear to this initiative.

India is well-placed to take the lead in shaping and pursuing this cooperative security framework. India has had a continuous relationship with the region which has sustained for the last two millennia. This has created a high level of cultural comfort between India and West Asia. Above all, India has a record of being non-hegemonic, non-prescriptive and non-intrusive in its ties with other countries, which is viewed most favourably in West Asia.

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## 4.

### List of Presenters

#### 1. Ambassador Talmiz Ahmad (*Conference Chair*)

Former Ambassador of India to Saudi Arabia, Oman & the UAE

#### 2. Ambassador Rajendra Abhyankar

Professor of Practice of Diplomacy & Public Affairs, Indiana University, Bloomington, & former Ambassador of India to Syria & Turkey

#### 3. Mr. Rajeev Agarwal

Political Analyst & Strategic Affairs writer

#### 4. Dr. Gulshan Dietl

Professor (Retired), Jawaharlal Nehru University

#### 5. Ms. Kanchi Gupta

Associate Fellow,  
Observer Research Foundation (ORF)

#### 6. Ambassador Ranjit Gupta

Former Ambassador of India to Oman,  
Thailand & Spain

#### 7. Dr. Zakir Hussain

Research Fellow,  
Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA)

#### 8. Dr. N Janardhan

Political Analyst, Dubai

#### 9. Mr. Muddassir Quamar

Centre for West Asian Studies,  
Jawaharlal Nehru University

#### 10. Dr. Meena Singh Roy

Research Fellow & Coordinator, West Asia Centre,  
Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses (IDSA)

#### 11. Ambassador Sanjay Singh

Former Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs,  
Government of India

#### 12. Mr. Siddharth Varadarajan

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## Photo Gallery



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