

# *DATELINE MEI*

No. 55

Monday, 1 February 2016

## **Trends and Prospects for Cooperation with the Middle East**

**P R Kumaraswamy**  
**MEI@ND**

**O**ne week is too long a time in the Middle East and it is difficult, even dangerous, to be an optimist. The choice, therefore, is between the uncertain status quo and an unpredictable nightmare. With that as caveat, one can visualize five short-to-medium term challenges.

1. Even after five years, it is too early to write off the Arab Spring and the Arab yearning for change has not run its course. While lacking an overarching roadmap, individual Arab countries will have to evolve a model that reflects and suits their social and demographic specificity. No country can influence or determine the appropriate model for another.

2. The declining American influence in the region will continue with no other country or group of countries being in a position to provide an alternate leadership. Some external powers will try to carve out spheres of influence without dominating the entire region.

3. Religious extremism and sectarian tensions are here to stay and political violence would continue to undermine the stability, territorial integrity and in some cases even viability of the state.

4. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is important but an immediate resolution is unlikely because both sides lack wisdom, foresight and political will. Moreover, it is not the core problem facing the region, and Arab and non-Arab countries have far more serious problems to worry about than

the statelessness of the Palestinians.

5. Oil prices will continue to be low and this will affect both big and smaller energy players. The entry of post-sanctions Iran will exert further pressure on prices. The low oil price will also affect the search for non-hydrocarbon energy alternatives.

## **Areas of Cooperation for India**

It is too early for India to get involved in any regional security arrangement as it would have to answer two basic questions; security for whom? And against whom? Most regimes feel threatened internally and any involvement would entail India taking sides between rival factions.

In the broader sense, ISIS, religious extremism and indoctrination, terror financing and cyber security would be the prime areas of cooperation. In recent years, Israel dominated India's security cooperation. Now, fighting ISIS entails enhanced cooperation with countries like Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Religious extremism poses an existential threat to these countries and cooperating with them makes good common sense for India.

Expatriates and energy components are the strengths of India's engagement with the Persian Gulf Region. But they are also its weaknesses and prevent India from fully exploiting its potential. Trade figures are misleading and economic engagement is largely confined to energy imports. During 2014-15, for example, energy made up more than 40 per cent of India's total trade with the Persian Gulf region. Indeed, oil imports make up over 90 per cent of India's imports from Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. In the case of Yemen it is close to 99 per cent. Likewise, India is more than the maids, drivers, shopkeepers and assistants that an ordinary Arab encounters on a daily basis.

While non-official collaborations are important, to be meaningful and effective India's engagement with the region will have to be primarily political. There are no alternatives to G2G engagements, especially in the Middle East where leaders continue to play a dominant role.

Fortunately, India now has an External Affairs Minister for whom foreign policy is her only priority. Contrary to initial media speculations, she has been handling the portfolio fairly well. Since June 2014, she has travelled to 31 countries, including Bahrain, UAE, Oman, Egypt, Palestine and Israel.

## **India's Engagement Strategy**

---

Narendra Modi does not want to be a one-term prime minister. His domestic as well as foreign policy agenda is economy. Therefore, the size of the economy or population is less important for him than the size of that country's commitment to India. The UAE is a case in point. Modi would therefore prioritize countries of the region depending upon their contribution to India's economic growth and development.

When it comes to the Middle East and its problems, India is a disinterested power and not an indifferent one. At the same time, despite temptations, suggestions and friendly invitations, India would desist from any intervention, involvement or even mediation in any of the conflicts and tensions in the region. Over the years, its political engagement with the Middle East has been limited and it would have to reverse this trend and increase high-level contacts, exchanges and interactions. It will have to diversify its engagement and add economic content.

India will have to recognize the security dilemmas of its interlocutors. For example, Saudi Arabia is an economic power but in military terms its security concerns and fears are not different from those of small states. This is reflected in its approach towards a number of regional developments. Thus, even when disagreeing with its depiction of Iran and its ambitions in the region, India will have to recognize Saudi concerns vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic.

If India is serious about cooperation, then it should use the terminology commonly used by the countries of the region, namely, Middle East and not the Indo-centric term, West Asia.

### **Is India a model?**

Despite the temptations, India should avoid projecting itself as a model for the turbulent Middle East. Democracy and plurality presuppose an innate willingness to not impose one's views and values upon others. Just as one is willing to learn from the experiences and wisdom of other individuals and nations, one should also leave it to others to learn and unlearn from the Indian experience.

**Note:** This was presented at the IDSA's Second West Asia Conference titled 'Ideology, Politics and New Security Challenges in West Asia,' held on 19-20 January 2016. Web Link: [http://idsa.in/idsacomment/cooperation-with-the-middle-east\\_prkumaraswamy\\_210116](http://idsa.in/idsacomment/cooperation-with-the-middle-east_prkumaraswamy_210116)

**Professor P R Kumaraswamy is Honorary Director of MEI@ND.**

---

**As part of its editorial policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spelling and date formats to make the text uniformly accessible and stylistically consistent. The views**

DATELINE-55/KUMARASWAMY

**expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of the MEI@ND. Editor, MEI@ND: P R Kumaraswamy**