

# COMMENTARY

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## **A Responsible Rising Power: India's Widening Engagements in the Middle East**

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The week-long visit of Minister of State for External Affairs M. J. Akbar to Lebanon (17-18 August), Syria (19-20 August) and Iraq (21-23 August) has come at a crucial time. The situation in the Syrian theatre is changing and the Islamic State is under stress due to persistent military intervention by Russian-Iranian alliance in Syria and the advances of US-backed government and Kurdish forces in Iraq. Though the situation in Syria remains chaotic, the balance has started to turn in favour of the regime. The Islamic State has faced reverses and loss of key towns in both Syria and Iraq and the changing facts on the ground indicate that Bashar al-Assad is here to stay for a foreseeable future. Hence, India's willingness to send its junior minister to Syria, Iraq and Lebanon holds significance and are indicative of a recalibration of its policy toward the Levant.

During the visit, Akbar held meetings with a number of leaders in Lebanon including Prime Minister Tammam Salam and president of the National Assembly Nabih Berry. In Syria the minister met President Bashar al-Assad and other leaders and in Iraq held meetings with President Fuad Masum and Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Eshaiqer. It is the first visit to the trouble spot in the Middle East since the NDA government came to power. In fact, the UPA government had also kept its engagement with countries in Levant low and for long, Iraq and Levant have remained on the margins of India's Middle East policy.

The visit to Syria is notable as it is the first since the outbreak of Arab Spring protests in 2011 that subsequently descended into a civil war. Until now, India refrained from taking a clear position and largely avoided issuing statement on Syria except urging all the parties to resolve the crisis through negotiations and heed to the aspirations of the people. Though the Syrian side

kept its engagement with a number of visits including by foreign minister Walid Moallem, latest in January 2016, India avoided sending a delegation to Syria. This was mainly because of the prevailing situation and the lack of clarity on the fate of Assad regime. Now that there are signs for the status-quo to continue, India's willingness to engage with the regime shows that it does not wish to remain a fence-sitter.

As suggested in the statement by M. J. Akbar, there are two important aspects to engagement with Assad regime – counter-terrorism cooperation and partnering in Syrian reconstruction. According to the official Syrian news agency, SANA, Akbar “highlighted the importance of cooperation in the field of combating terrorism” and also said that an “age of reconstruction” should follow the “age of destruction.” In both areas Syria presents ample opportunities. In counter-terrorism, its security and intelligence agencies can share vital information on preventing radical Islamist groups’ penetration in India and help identify Indians who have been in touch with such groups. Secondly, India should not lose out on reconstruction opportunities in Syria as it did in the case of post-2003 Iraq. Hence, the decisions by Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL) and Apollo International to complete their pending projects in Damascus and Hama respectively.

Akbar's visit is also significant for India's larger Middle East policy. It indicates that the region is on top of current government's foreign policy priorities. Since taking over, Prime Minister Modi and External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj have undertaken a number of high level visits to the region including to Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE, Turkey, Egypt, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain. Moreover, President Pranab Mukherjee has visited Israel, Palestine and Jordan while Vice President Hamid Ansari has visited Tunisia, Morocco and other countries. These engagements are significant because of a number of reasons, especially because of India's dependence on oil imports for energy security and the 8 million-strong Indian migrants in the region. However, the engagements so far have focused on the Persian Gulf. The outreach to the Levant is indicative that though the core of Indian interest lies in this extended neighbourhood, it wishes to explore opportunities beyond the Gulf.

There are three important takeaways from Akbar's visit to the Levant so far as the emerging direction in India's Middle East policy is concerned. Firstly, as mentioned, India is looking beyond the Gulf as far as its engagements in the Middle East are concerned. Though Saudi Arabia and Iran are important and along with UAE and Qatar are the main suppliers of crude oil and gas to India, Israel, Iraq, and Syria are also important both for economic developments and counter-terrorism. Earlier this year Iraq has taken over Saudi Arabia as the leading oil supplier to India. Moreover, the prime minister is due to visit Israel early next year that has been India's major security and technology partner. Now with increased engagement with Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, India can expect to gain through reconstruction projects. It can also use its goodwill in the region to impress upon the need for political negotiations to stabilize the situation.

Secondly, the visit indicates that India is not ready to take sides in the regional rivalries and is willing to engage with all legitimate actors. The current scenario in the Middle East is quite complex with raging sectarian and ethnic tensions and brewing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, both ambitious of increasing their regional influence. The two are engaged in proxy wars in Syria and Yemen and are not ready to bring down tensions despite continued loss of life and the worsening humanitarian crises. It has led to unprecedented regional polarization and extra-regional interventions by the US and Russia. While India has good relations with both, they have continued to emphasize the role of the other in spread of terrorism and instability in the region. By engaging with both as well as with other countries, India has indicated that it will refrain from taking sides and continue to balance its relations with all legitimate regional actors.

Thirdly, the visit shows that India is concerned with the rise of the Islamic State and wishes to take all measures to prevent it from growing its tentacles in India. If the reports of Indian youths joining the Islamic State and the recent attacks in Bangladesh are any indications, the terrorist group has, if not a significant but still, a following in the subcontinent. The porous border with Bangladesh and social media campaigns by the Islamic State targeting Indians are a major concern. Threat of radicalization among disgruntled sections of Indian Muslims is a reality and intelligence cooperation with regional actors including Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran, Israel and Syria is significant. Hence, security and intelligence cooperation has been a constant theme in the statements issued during visits by Indian leaders to the region including in Syria and Iraq.

The situation in the Middle East is complex and convoluted but it remains an important region for India due to its economic potentials and security implications. Hence, there is no scope for ambivalence in engaging with all major regional actors and the visit by the junior minister to Levant is the clearest indication towards this. Tenacity is the key to realize the true potentials offered in the region and it cannot come except through proactive engagements.

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