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EDITORIAL

Inexorable Tensions and Conflicts in the Persian Gulf

Tensions and conflicts in the Persian Gulf continued to dominate the geopolitical landscape, drawing international attention towards this region. In July 2019, Iran responded to increasing American pressure by exceeding the limits of the amount of enriched uranium in its stockpile thus violating the nuclear deal it had signed in 2015. The existing crisis was further intensified during the seizures of each other's oil tankers by Iran and Britain. Since then the region has witnessed a series of escalatory incidents.

Amidst escalating tensions and growing conflicts in the region, India continued its efforts to stay engaged with the region strengthening its political and economic relations. India-Gulf ties witnessed a new push during the visit of Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the United Arab Emirates to New Delhi from July 7-9, 2019. This was yet another step towards cementing bilateral ties in trade and energy and exploring new areas of cooperation to re-energize the India-UAE Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Renewed emphasis was given by India to increase economic engagement with Egypt. In the first four months of 2019, the exchange of trade between Egypt and India increased 11.2 per cent on a year-to-year basis, recording \$1.4 billion. With an aim to enhance India-Jordan cooperation, the 10th bilateral Trade and Economic Joint Committee meeting was held in New Delhi, co-chaired by the India's Commerce and Industry Minister, Nirmala Sitharaman and Yarub Qudah from Jordan. Both countries not only inked a revised economic and trade cooperation agreement but discussed ways to increase cooperation in diverse areas such as customs, taxation and visas to promote trade and investment between India and Jordan. While New Delhi made every possible effort to enhance cooperation with the region, there was also demand for India to play a greater role in the region. In this context, the exiled government of Yemen [has sought](#) assistance from India. Yahya Yahya Ghoobar, Consul-General of Yemen in Mumbai urged "We want India to open its eyes to this crisis and intervene in a way that it sees fit."

In the context of aforesaid developments, the current issue of *West Asia Watch* examines the consequences of increasing US-Iran tensions for the region, complexities of the Yemen conflict and opening of a new war front in Iraq by Israel. The guest column looks at India's options in the light of increasing tensions between the US and Iran.

US and Iran Ratchet Up the War Rhetoric

Dr Lakshmi Priya

Tensions in the Gulf region peaked in July 2019, when Iran violated the nuclear deal it had signed with the major powers (P5+1) in 2015, by exceeding the limit of the amount of enriched uranium in its stockpile — a step it purportedly took reacting to the US' unilateral withdrawal from the deal earlier and its re-imposition of sanctions. The crisis was further aggravated that month when Britain and Iran engaged in tit-for-tat seizures of oil tankers after the re-imposition of sanctions by the Trump administration.

To understand the significance of this escalation, a study of the origins of the crisis is necessary. In July 2015, a multilateral nuclear deal was signed between the then Obama-led US administration and other world powers with Iran, which is known as the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action). Within six months of the signing of the deal, UN sanctions on Iran were lifted as the latter was found to have fulfilled its obligations. Following UN action, the US also removed the sanctions previously imposed on Iran. However, the reprieve was short-lived as within a year of the deal, Donald Trump replaced Obama as the US president and spoke of his dislike of the JCPOA in no uncertain terms. Early in his presidency, he announced US withdrawal from the multilateral nuclear deal, re-imposed sanctions on Iran and provided a two-phase grace period for corporations to end their newly-struck deals in the wake of his decision.

In April 2019, Trump even designated the so-called military arm of the Iranian Revolution, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), as a foreign terrorist organization and imposed wide-ranging economic and travel sanctions against it. For its part, Iran designated the US as a state sponsor of terrorism. In early May, US National Security Advisor [John R Bolton](#) announced that US was sending an aircraft carrier strike group and Air force bombers to the Middle East in the wake of the escalatory signs and clarified that US did not want a war with Iran. Three days later, Iran declared that it had decided to increase uranium enrichment stockpiles and heavy water production in violation of the JCPOA nuclear deal. Since then the region has witnessed a series of escalatory incidents. It is interesting to note the response of regional and international states and actors to these events.

Other Actors in the Fray

On May 12, four ships including two Saudi oil tankers were damaged in mysterious sabotage attacks off the coast of Fujairah (UAE). Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Norway briefed the UNSC about the incidents and the findings of the [investigation team](#) revealed that “the four attacks were part of a sophisticated and coordinated operation carried out by an actor with significant operational capacity, most likely a state actor.” The Prime Minister of Lebanon, foreign ministries of Bahrain, Kuwait, the Secretary-General of the Gulf

Cooperation Council (GCC), Dr Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani, condemned the sabotage while US President Trump warned “it’s going to be a bad problem for Iran if something happens.”

Two days later, Houthi rebels launched drone attacks on a Saudi oil pipeline and made it dysfunctional for which the US and Saudi Arabia blamed Iran. Riyadh hosted three high-level summits to present a unified Arab and Muslim position against Iran. The foreign ministry of the UAE condemned the attacks while the news portal [Middle East Eye](#) reported that a confidential report compiled for the Emirati leadership criticized the Saudi reaction to the attacks on oil tankers in the Gulf and said that the Saudi media was too quick to point the finger on Yemen’s Iran-backed Houthi movement. Referring to a Fars News report, [The Jerusalem Post](#) mentioned that Iranian media celebrated the Houthi drone attack on Saudi facilities.

On May 19, a Katyusha rocket landed near the US Embassy in Baghdad after which Donald Trump told Iran that if it wants to fight it will lead to the official end of Iran. Iran’s Foreign Minister Javad Zarif responded by saying that the ‘genocidal taunts’ from the US will not ‘end Iran.’ A few days later, Trump ordered 1,500 additional troops to Middle East so as to increase the protection of US forces, declared an Emergency over Iran, and moved ahead with arms sales to UAE, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, while claiming that the US is not looking for regime change in Iran. The Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs said that Saudi Arabia doesn’t

want war but will defend itself against Iran, if needed.

As Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reached Tehran in June to mediate between the US and Iran, two tankers of Norwegian and Japanese origin came under attack on June 13.

On June 17, the US announced 1,000 more troops for the Middle East after two oil tankers caught fire in Gulf of Oman by a flying limpet and Iran claimed that it is ten days away from surpassing the nuclear deal. Iran also reiterated that it would reverse the measures if European signatories made an effort to circumvent the US sanctions. Saudi Energy Minister Khalid al-Falih called for a "swift and decisive" response to the attack.

On June 20, Iranian forces shot down a US Global Hawk drone and a day later, Trump tweeted that he had called off an attack on Iran keeping the probable casualties in mind. Instead, he ordered a cyber-attack on IRGC and Iranian missile systems, while imposing new sanctions on Iranian supreme leader, Ali Khamenei. On July 1, Iran exceeded the JCPOA’s limit on uranium stockpiles. The US also deployed nearly a dozen F-22 Raptor fighter jets at the Al-Udeid Airbase in Qatar to defend American interests. [The Times of Israel](#) reported that some Israeli officials were concerned about a non-decisive response from the US and its probable interpretation by Iran as US unwillingness to engage in military operations.

The tensions would have remained limited to the US and Iran, if Britain had not intervened in early July. On July 4, Panama flagged vessel *Grace 1* was seized

by the British Royal Marines after the Government of Gibraltar accused an Iranian tanker of transporting oil to Syria in violation of EU sanctions. Iranian leader Ali Khamenei described the incident as British acts of piracy. On July 11, British Royal Navy's frigate *HMS Montrose* foiled an Iranian attempt to capture the UK tanker *British Heritage* and deployed *HMS Duncan* to the Persian Gulf. Three days later, a Panama-flagged vessel disappeared near Iran. However, nobody claimed its ownership. On July 20, the IRGC seized a British flagged tanker *Stena Impero* with 23 crew members but later released seven Indian crew members. Iran expressed its willingness to exchange *Stena Impero* for *Grace 1*. Gibraltar released *Grace 1* on August 15 after, which Tehran renamed it as *Adrian Darya 1* and registered it under an Iranian flag. A few days later, State Department pointsman on Iran Brian Hook, offered millions of dollars to the [Indian captain](#) to steer the *Adrian Darya 1* to a country where it could be seized by the United States Armed Forces, but he rejected the offer.

International Response

As regards the international response, China opposed the US' unilateral sanctions and supported Tehran's efforts to safeguard its interests. It also welcomed Russia's proposal of bilateral and multilateral consultations between key stakeholders, including the UN Security Council, the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and establish a regional security organization. About the possibility of US-Iran war, [Russian President Putin](#) said that "It would be a catastrophe, for the

region at the very minimum, because it will lead to an increase of violence and potential increase in refugees from the region." As reported by [The Moscow Times](#) Zamir Kabulov, the Foreign Ministry's special envoy for Asian countries, said at a Russian-Iranian policy forum in Moscow that, "Iran will withstand this type of fight and Iran is not alone." Iranian President Rouhani's discussions over phone with French President Macron to contain US-Iran tensions incited Donald Trump's response: "I know Emmanuel means well, as do all others, but nobody speaks for the United States but the United States itself." French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian responded that France, "requires no authorization" to try and calm tensions with Iran. German [Foreign Minister Heiko Maas](#) said that "Germany will not take part in the sea mission presented and planned by the United States," and it believes the US strategy of exercising "maximum pressure" against Iran "is wrong".

German Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said that he wants to see a Europe-led approach in the *Stena Impero* case but it would also be important to have support from US to make it viable and effective. Germany, France and the UK are the remaining signatories of P5+1 in JCPOA and hope Iran would abide by the deal especially when Iran has given [two-month](#) extension to the EU to save the nuclear deal.

(Dr. Lakshmi Priya is a Research Analyst with the West Asia Centre at IDSA.)

Confusion Compounds Yemen's Conflicts

Nagapushpa Devendra

Yemen is currently afflicted with three separate, but interlinked wars – a conflict between the Iran-backed northern Houthi insurgents and Saudi-led international campaign; a fight between the Yemeni government and UAE-backed separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) representing South Yemen that seeks secession; an ongoing conflict between various forces in the country against terrorist groups such as Al-Qaida and ISIS.

While the Stockholm Agreement signed between the government and Houthi insurgents in December 2018 offers slim hope, the resurgence of secessionism in the south has come as a double blow to prospects of peace in the country. It appears that members of the STC are ready to exploit the government's conflict with Houthi rebels in the north and gain benefits from the UAE's decision to withdraw most of its forces from Yemen.

The UAE's 'Support' for Southern Movement

On April 27, 2017, the internationally recognised President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi sacked former governor Aidrous al-Zubaydi on the charge of political disobedience and support for the Southern Movement (SM). Within a week, members of the SM held a mass protest in Khor Maksar. They labelled Zubaydi's removal

by Hadi as an [act of aggression](#) against Yemen's 'South', condemning the North's 'invasion' in 1994. On May 11, 2017, Zubaydi issued his [Historic Aden Declaration](#), instituting the 26-member STC and authorising himself to represent the South based on the "the legal authority derived from the will of the people".

Pro-government allies like Saudi Arabia avoided giving legitimacy to the STC, although the UAE decided to [support](#) Zubaydi, according him the status of a president and giving him monetary grants. As part of the Arab coalition, the UAE's official line is that it supports the Hadi government and the constitutional legitimacy of Yemen. But, the country has also sought to leverage its role in the conflict and has expanded its military and economic access to the Horn of Africa and Bab-al-Mandab – a vital chokepoint in global trade routes. The UAE intends to achieve its goal through the separatist in Aden. It has bolstered the STC to stage a coup against the Hadi government demanding that Aden remain a city for civilian operation under the governor [according](#) to Article 273-277 of the Yemeni constitution.

The secessionists want to form an independent South Yemen and have been calling for UN-backed peace talks for

resolving the conflict. But the UN and much of the international community is giving greater priority to the conflict between the government and Houthi rebels, due to the regional dynamic of that conflict. It signed the Stockholm Agreement in December 2018, which was at first considered a breakthrough between the parties.

Saudi Arabia did not seem to approve the dramatic shift in the UAE's policy in Yemen. Riyadh apparently allowed the Hadi government to condemn the UAE's support to the separatists of the South as "illegal". It also did not put curbs on a growing [resentment](#) against Abu Dhabi's military presence in South Yemen. In mid-June, demonstrations broke out in Shabwah governorate that featured banners opposing the UAE's "occupation" of the region. On July 1, the popular unrest intensified on the island of Socotra, where demonstrators raised the Yemeni flag and decried the UAE's alleged destabilization of the island. Atef al-Sokotri, an activist participating in the Socotra demonstrations, described the [protest](#) as the "largest in the history of Socotra," and linked them to the unpopularity of the UAE-allied Southern separatists.

The Aden Standoff

The divergence in the positions of Saudi Arabia and the UAE eventually came to a head when Abu Dhabi announced the drawdown of its military forces in Yemen. The decision triggered a lot of speculation and debate, which mostly focused on the UAE's supposed [apprehensions](#) about

becoming the prime target of the ongoing military escalation between the US and Iran. Thus, the UAE partially withdrew its troops from Yemen and secured its relations with Iran to ensure its interests in the region.

Disenchanted with the UAE's partial withdrawal, the STC started issuing anti-government statements that led to clashes between Yemeni forces and separatists in Aden. The United Nations estimated the loss of more than 40 lives and injury to 260 others in fighting within both pro-government factions in and around the city. The situation worsened when despite increase in Saudi Arabia's forces, the STC more or less seized control of the city.

On August 26, 2019, Riyadh made a ceasefire offer to STC, who in turn expressed their willingness to participate in the Saudi-led dialogue at Jeddah. As a show of goodwill, the separatists withdrew their forces from the presidential palace and its central bank offices. So far, they have not surrendered their military sites, saying that they will not do so unless members of the Islamist Islah Party and "northerners" were purged from their government positions.

While negotiations do not show signs of breakthrough as fighting between STC and Hadi forces continues, it is clear that the situation in Aden has to some extent damaged Saudi-UAE relations. While Saudi Arabia is trying to form a "[joint committee](#)" to "stabilize" the situation in Aden, the UAE has been supporting separatists in various parts of South

Yemen. The government is [claiming](#) the death of, and injuries to, 300 of its soldiers due to the UAE's military strikes every day. Hadi's loyalists accuse Abu Dhabi of fomenting a coup with separatist militias to topple the government and to seek secession in the south. Hadi has demanded the UAE's [expulsion](#) from the coalition. In an effort to justify the strikes, the UAE officials have said they have targeted "terrorists" who had attacked "coalition" forces. However, the definition of "terrorists" and the categorization of who constitutes a member of the "coalition" has been debated, as the UAE considers Islah Party members as "terrorists".

Humanitarian Crisis

The situation in Yemen continues to descend into anarchy. The infighting in Aden highlights the fundamental incompatibility of the two big factions in the "pro-government" coalition — pro-government forces, which includes the Islah/Muslim Brotherhood Party, supported by Saudi Arabia and the Southern Transitional Council (STC) backed by the UAE. It also points to a potential breakdown in the Saudi-Emirati relationship more generally, as their agendas diverge. Mutual hatred of Iran can paper over many differences for a while, but it cannot overcome all of them indefinitely.

There is a real concern that the situation in Aden may trigger a "civil war within a civil war". Saudi Arabia has [refused](#) any "new reality" imposed by the actors in the south and states that any attempt to destabilise

Yemen's security would be considered a threat against the Kingdom and "dealt with decisively." It continues to increase its military presence, which is understandable as there is a vacuum created by the UAE's withdrawal. It is also trying to quash the infighting in other parts of South Yemen. However, it may not be able to do so unaided. At this point, it is important that the international community works with both Saudi Arabia and the UAE to ensure their compliance with the UN-led efforts in Yemen. Although the international community is trying to salvage the Stockholm Agreement, substantial issues on other core matters related to South Yemen need to be negotiated.

The conflicts between various parties in Yemen have taken a heavy toll on the country's population, a disaster which the UN describes as "the world's worst humanitarian crisis". It [estimates](#) that the civilian casualty claimed 6,872 lives and left 10,768 injured by November 2018. More than 50,000 are estimated to have been killed by the on-going famine and at least 9.8 million people in the country are in acute need of health services. The escalating tensions in Aden are likely to have a devastating effect on the civilian population, who which is already trapped in their homes and left with limited supplies of basic goods and amenities.

Moreover, splinters within coalition forces have allowed al-Qaeda and ISIS to become active in provinces like Shabwa and Abyan. Islamist forces have reportedly carried out several attacks since the escalation in

Aden. It is likely that they will continue to take advantage of the internecine feuds. Therefore, it is crucial for the international community to play a prominent role in Yemen, bring conflicting parties to talks and support the UN in implementing a

coherent and effective strategy for protecting the peace initiative.

(Nagapushpa Devendra is a Research Analyst with the West Asia Centre at IDSA.

Is Iraq Israel's New War Front against Iran?

Jatin Kumar

The recent air-strikes on Iraqi territories by unidentified aircraft have given rise to speculations that Israel has started targeting Iran-backed Shiite militias inside Iraq.

It has been widely reported that Israeli Air Force (IAF) targeted Iran-backed Iraqi militia targets on July 19, July 30 and August 21, 2019. Israeli officials have so far neither confirmed nor denied responsibility for the strikes. Various news portals, journalists, and military officials have speculated that the strikes were launched by the IAF. Surprisingly, even Iraq has neither acknowledged nor condemned the strikes in the way Syria does “whenever there are Israeli raids conducted on Syrian soil”.

Former Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister, Baha al-Araji, hinted in his *Twitter* account that Israel was responsible for targeting “a weapons depot controlled by an Iran-backed Shiite militia in Baghdad”. These speculations were indirectly confirmed by Prime Minister Netanyahu in his briefing in Kyiv hotel on August 19, 2019, while responding to a question over reported attacks on military installations in Iraq recently. He said “Iran has no immunity, anywhere”. He further noted, “We will act- and currently are acting- against them, wherever it is necessary”.

If these claims are true then it would be the first time in the last 38 years that Israel would have targeted Iraqi territory. The last attack was conducted in 1981 after IAF demolished the Osirak nuclear reactor to neutralise Iraq’s nuclear programme. Subsequently, Israel maintained a policy of restraint and allowed the US to deal with the situations in Iraq. Evidently, during the 1991 Gulf war, Israel did not retaliate after Iraq launched 39 scud missiles deep inside Israeli territory. The decision was broadly influenced by US fear and pressure that Israeli retaliation would adversely impact US’ regional allies during the war.

The current strikes started on July 19, 2019 when the Iraqi army announced that an unknown aircraft – reportedly Israeli – had bombed an “Iraqi military base near the town of Amerli in eastern Salahuddin, north of Baghdad”. The strikes were aimed at a base for pro-Iranian militias of the *Hashd al Shaabi*, which comprises a Shiite Turkmen Brigade. On July 28, 2019, another strike targeted the Iraqi Camp Ashraf, which was the “headquarters of the exiled People’s Mujahedin of Iran”. This camp is located 80 kilometres from the Iranian border near Baghdad. Subsequent strikes targeting PMF officials and weapons depots took place at the Saqr military base on August 12, 2019 and the Balad airbase in the Salah ad-Din

Governate, north of Baghdad on August 20, 2019. The western Iraqi city of Qaim was also targeted on August 25, 2019. *The Times of Israel* citing Asharq Al-Awsat, said that strikes targeted Iranian advisers and a ballistic missile shipment.

Iran is a top security priority for Israel and the Jewish state has launched scores of airstrikes in Syria in recent years primarily focusing on foiling the sophisticated arms transfers – including guided missiles – to the Iran-backed groups. The growing Iranian presence in Iraqi territories, capitalizing on the chaotic situation in West Asia, has further increased Israeli security concerns. According to Israeli security experts, in last few years, Iraq has become a base for Iran-backed efforts to target the country. This is mainly due to the success of the Israeli military in weakening Iran in Syria through back-to-back airstrikes. After the US' decision to withdraw from Syria, Israel has significantly increased airstrikes and demolished Iranian positions in Syria. It

has pushed Iranian militias to set up new sites, mainly outside Syria, mostly Iraq and Lebanon (areas controlled by Hezbollah). These sites are primarily temporary stations, in some cases mobile rocket batteries installed on trucks and in abandoned camps.

The current strikes indicate that Israel, with the support of the US, is willing to expand its strategic manoeuvrability to counter Iran's presence in the region, especially Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. An analysis of the current situation underlines that these strikes are likely to continue in the near future and the utilisation of technology will play a key role during strikes and counter strikes. Although, the possibility of direct conflict cannot be ruled out, both Israel and Iran are aware of the risks involved with escalation and direct war, especially in the current geopolitical climate.

(Jatin Kumar is Research Analyst in the West Asia Centre, IDSA.)

GUEST COLUMN

India's Options in Wake of US-Iran Crisis

Ambassador Anil Trigunayat

The die has been cast but the face-saving exit ramp is missing in the Persian Gulf conflict. Nowhere will the conflagration be as disastrous for global security as in West Asia. The present imbroglio between the US and Iran was expected.

In early 2016, then-US presidential candidate Trump had vowed to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, signed by the P5+1 to bring phased de-nuclearisation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It was dismissed by Trump as the “worst deal ever”. The Iranian regime had been seen as enhancing its politico-military influence in the region through its several proxies and empathisers in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon.

Saudi Arabia and Israel were mainly opposed to Obama's shift and considered the inefficacious deal to be a tool for strengthening the so-called “evil regime”, which could further undermine their own security. Obama's outreach to Iran was perceived to be a snub for the Arab Gulf regimes and Israel, who wanted to contain the expanding influence and capacity of Iran to intervene militarily without impunity through its proxies.

Hence in keeping with his electoral promises and disdain for the international agreements President Trump decided to withdraw from the JCPOA in 2016 and re-imposed crippling sanctions on Iran in order to bring it back to the negotiating table with the objective of redrawing the conditions of the agreement, much to the dismay of the EU, China, India Japan and others, whose economies heavily depend on Iranian oil imports. Russia, having close relations with Iran and itself under US sanctions, found yet another platform to challenge US hegemony.

Iran is not Iraq or Yemen and over the decades has found a way to circumvent the impact of sanctions and was beginning to enjoy the positive economic impact of the JCPOA. Its geo-strategic control over the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf provides Iran a unique negotiating advantage. About a third of the global trade and energy supplies go through the narrow Strait of Hormuz and are crucial for the energy security for Asian countries. Hence safe passages and freedom of navigation there are of paramount importance for global trade and energy transit.

On the other hand, there are several non-state actors that could be involved in the

event Iran is attacked. In retaliation, Iran may not be able to inflict much damage on US assets but unless comprehensively neutralized, its missiles could convert the theatre into an irreparable war zone and GCC countries and the world dependent on their oil and gas will suffer greatly with the resultant economic recession and depression. It may be a hybrid warfare in which all will be losers. Moreover, the activation of the Houthis, Hamas and Hezbollah as well as Iran-controlled militias out of Iraq and elsewhere along with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards could create multiple blind spots.

Meanwhile, the US asking for a ‘coalition of the willing’ to guard their own assets in the Gulf has its own repercussions for the nebulous alliance. As such with the ongoing Qatar blockade, GCC is a divided house. The US itself has been unable to garner any support from its NATO allies, except the UK and Israel, to precipitate action against Iran. A little flicker may charge the fire.

The war may impact all major economies greatly except the US and Russia who are themselves competitors of the Middle Eastern oil and gas in the same Asian and European markets. India is hugely dependent on its extended neighbourhood in West Asia for its energy security and investments that have just begun to flow in. Almost 70 per cent of India’s oil and 90 per cent of its gas requirements are met from the region. Until the recent re-imposition of sanctions, India was importing almost 11 per cent of Iranian crude which has now

been reduced to almost zero, peeving the Iranians, who had even sent their Foreign Minister to India just before the elections to work out a modus operandi. Iran, through the Chabahar Port, which has also emerged as a major partner for India’s access to Afghanistan, Central Asia, to an extent could become an alternate to China’s Belt and Road project.

At the same time, India’s biggest problem in the event of an all-out war will be the welfare of her eight million Indians in the GCC area, which is even difficult to fathom and the consequences it will have on domestic politics of the country. But India seems to have made a considered decision that for some analysts might appear to be adversely impacting on her strategic autonomy. Already we have witnessed the Indian seamen being caught in the midst of the tanker capture saga by Iran and the UK, since Indian crew on most commercial ships predominate. Fortunately, both Iran and the UK have either released or provided consular access to the detained crew. India has its own list of woes with the US in trade, technology and defence purchase areas, where Trump would like India to follow its own diktat in compliance of sanctions against Iran and Russia. There are no simple choices and every decision will have its own recoil and reaction.

The Middle East, especially the GCC, is crucial for India’s trade, transit, energy security and the Diaspora’s welfare. Hence, it is essential that in the current uncertain scenario when even an unintended act could trigger military confrontation and

subsequent chaos, India as a major stakeholder should begin to reach out to all concerned to prevent war, lest it be seen as passive, unreliable, irrelevant and unwilling to take risk. At present, India may not have the means to mediate in regional issues. Despite tremendous goodwill, it may be necessary for an emerging regional and global power to eventually get involved in reconciliation efforts with like-minded and a trusted group of countries. Trilateral cooperation should be envisaged as a means of alleviating some of the problems associated with India's lack of capacity and inability to deliver. Pro-active engagement is essential.

There is demand in the region for greater Indian involvement and New Delhi should not be shy of trying to emerge as security provider in the region. India should be able to work with regional powers for ensuring maritime security. The issue of freedom of navigation and SLOCs is vital in the Gulf for India's energy security and other interests. Informal coalitions with countries like Russia, Qatar, Turkey, Oman and Iran on one side and the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other, could provide the exit ramps. Iran has to be part of the solution.

More consistent regional engagement is necessary as global geographies from the Indo-Pacific to Eurasia undergo a transformation. While strengthening bilateral ties is important and New Delhi has had great success in that regard, the regional configuration as a whole should be

prioritised. Perhaps, a credible Special Envoy or several of them conversant with the region or countries could be appointed to conduct the outreach. However, they need to be provided resources, clear direction and reasonable tenure to avoid the implicit pit-falls.

In order to keep the channels open it will be useful to have Track 1.5 or Track 2 dialogues with the GCC, the Arab League and bilaterally with the participation of experts from various think tanks and experts. It should be a standing group which could be supported fully by the Government to broaden the access and contours of pressure points at any given time.

As crude oil and gas are essential for its economic progress, in the medium term India needs to ensure long-term uninterrupted supplies at a reasonable cost from alternate sources. It may be useful to explore a buyers' cartel with China, Japan and South Korea and some others which could provide the requisite negotiating leverage. Since unilateralism is on the rise, India could consider creating some companies in the PPP mode which could work on bilateral exchange formats, i.e., Rupee-Rial, Rupee-Rouble or Rupee-Yuan, while exploring options under the BRICS or other financial institutions which are not dependent on SWIFT.

With over eight million Indians in the region any spiralling conflict will pose an unprecedented challenge for the Government that has to be ready for any eventuality at all times. While standard

contingency plans are in place and may be scrambled at a short notice, it might be useful to institute a standing group of former Ambassadors, Defence Attaches and Intelligence officers who have experience in conflict zones and were instrumental in evacuations etc. and have

retained their contacts in the region. The hope is that we won't have to cross the bridge but the boat should be ready to sail.

(The distinguished diplomat has been India's former Ambassador to Jordan, Libya and Malta).

WEST ASIA NEWS SURVEY

POLITICAL

1. European states fear nuclear deal could collapse

DUBAI (14 July): In a [joint statement](#), France, Britain and Germany said that Iran's nuclear deal could collapse following renewed sanctions by the United States on Iran, and Iran's decision to no longer respect some of its obligations.

The statement comes after Iranian President Hassan Rouhani mentioned in a televised speech that Tehran is ready to hold talks with the United States if it lifts sanctions and returns to the 2015 nuclear deal.

The joint statement released by the French President's office said that "The risks are such that it is necessary for all stakeholders to pause, and consider the possible consequences of their actions."

It added, "We believe that the time has come to act responsibly and to look for ways to stop the escalation of tension and resume dialogue." –*Arab News*

2. Bahrain calls Qatar biggest threat to GCC

JEDDAH (15 July): Bahraini Foreign Minister Khaled bin Ahmed said that [Qatar has become the biggest threat to the Gulf Cooperation Council](#).

The statement came in response to the broadcast of 52-minute controversial

documentary titled [Playing with Fire](#) by Al-Jazeera on 14 July.

The Bahraini minister vehemently condemned the documentary saying the broadcast was full of "lies and fallacies against the state of Bahrain," and it is just a "new episode in a series of conspiracies from a rogue state against the kingdom of Bahrain, and against the stability of the entire region." - *Arab News, Al Jazeera*

3. Saudi Arabia ends travel restrictions for women

RIYADH (20 August): In a royal decree Saudi Arabia announced an end to [travel restrictions](#) for women in the country.

It stated that every Saudi citizen had the right to obtain a passport, and limited the need for a guardian's approval to minors only (below 21 years).

The decision will have far reaching implications as it enables adult Saudi women to travel freely and exercise more control over family matters.

As per the decree, women will get the right to register child birth, marriage, divorce, to be issued official family documents and to be eligible as a guardian to minor children.

The decree is part of the reform measures taken by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. Last year Saudi Arabia ended

driving restrictions on women. –*Arab News*

4. Ethiopian Jews protest after Israeli policeman kills teen

TEL AVIV (3 July): On 2-4 July 2019, the Ethiopian-Israeli community and their supporters protested in Tel Aviv against the killing of an Ethiopian-Israeli teenager, Solomon Tekla, by an off-duty police officer.

The demonstrators said that the protest is not only about the killing of Tekla, but about the racism that the Israeli Ethiopian community is exposed to every day. On the other hand, the officer told an investigator that he felt that his life was in danger as the teenager was throwing stones at him and his wife. Therefore, he opened [fire at the ground, but it ricocheted and hit the young boy](#). The event has again sparked debate on the issue of discrimination against the black Jews within Israel. –*Jewish Telegraph Agency*

5. Kushner meets Netanyahu to discuss Trump’s ‘peace’ deal,

JERUSALEM (1 August): The advisor to the US President, Jared Kushner, met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during his regional tour on July 31, 2019. The meeting was held in Jerusalem to discuss the US plan on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The meeting was attended by US Middle East special envoy Jason Greenblatt, US Special Representative for Iran Brian Hook, [US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman and](#)

[Israel’s Ambassador to Washington Ron Dermer](#). However, details of the meeting were not disclosed. –*Press TV*

6. Israel seeks Trump’s backing on settlements

RAMALLAH (13 August): The Hebrew version of *The Times* of Israel’s news portal has reported that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is lobbying the US President Donald Trump to give the go-ahead to declare Israeli sovereignty of the West Bank [before the country’s upcoming general election](#).

The site reported that “Netanyahu is seeking a public declaration from US President Donald Trump ahead of the September elections backing an Israeli move to extend its sovereignty over Jewish settlements in the West Bank”. If he gets success in this move, it would allow Netanyahu to significantly attract right-wing voters and will assure that if he is again elected he can and will [move quickly to apply sovereignty over the settlements](#). - *The Palestinian Chronicle*

7. Israel, UAE engaged in “secret talks”

RAMALLAH (13 August): *The Wall Street Journal (WSJ)* reported that Israel and the UAE have been recently engaged in covert talks, organized by the US, to share information and coordinate against Iran. Quoting US officials familiar with clandestine diplomacy, the *WSJ* says the meetings were arranged by US special

[representative for Iran, Brian Hook.](#) - *The Wall Street Journal*

8. European Union opens a new mission in Kuwait

KUWAIT CITY (14 July): In a ceremony attended by Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Sabah, European Union diplomatic chief Federica Mogherini opened a new mission in Kuwait.

On the occasion, she said that EU is increasing its presence and engagement in the Middle East and [“What happens to the Gulf matters to Europe and what happens to Europe matters to the Gulf.”](#)

The mission in Kuwait is the third EU mission in the Gulf, the other two being in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and is one of the 142 EU missions in the world. Emphasizing [EU-Kuwait proximity](#), she added: “This new European Delegation to Kuwait is first and foremost a sign of how close the European Union and Kuwait have become in these years. In a moment of regional and global tensions, Kuwait is a voice of wisdom and a force for peace. And this is what has made us natural partners in these difficult times.” She also appreciated the mediation efforts of Kuwait in the region. – *Arab News, European Union External Action Service*

9. Oman's Foreign Minister visits Syria

MUSCAT (7 July): Oman's state minister for foreign affairs Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah visited Syria for the second time

since the Arab Spring and discussed bilateral relations and regional security with the Syrian President Bashar Al Assad in Damascus.

He also discussed ["economic and political challenges imposed on the region."](#) He met his Syrian counterpart Walid Muallam who visited Oman [last year](#).

Earlier, Alawi visited Damascus in 2015 to discuss ways to resolve the Syrian crisis. The Oman News Agency reported that Mr Muallam praised Muscat for taking [“supportive positions towards Syria at various Arab and international forums”](#). Oman is one of the few Arab states to have maintained relations with Syria as it adheres to a strict policy of non-intervention in regional affairs. Relations between Syria and Jordan, Bahrain and UAE too have improved in recent times. – *The National, An-Nahar, Gulf News, Al Arabiya, Haaretz*

SECURITY

10. Bahrain signs deal to purchase Patriot air defense

MANAMA (14 August): Bahrain has signed an agreement with the US to purchase Patriot Air Defense System that are capable of defence against ballistic missiles and cruise missiles in addition to manned and unmanned aircraft.

The US State Department approved more than \$5 billion worth of potential military sales of the Patriot Missile Defense System and related equipment to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain in May as per

the [Defense Security Cooperation Agency](#) press release.

Bahrain is the 17th country to purchase the Patriot Air Defense System. Bahrain is possibly buying 60 Patriot advanced capability-3 (PAC-3) missile segment enhancement (MSE) missiles, 36 Patriot MIM-104E guidance enhanced missiles (GEM-T) missiles with canisters which will enable Bahrain to improve [its 'missile defence capability, defend its territorial integrity, and deter regional threats'](#).

Lockheed-Martin is the prime contractor for the PAC-3 Missile, while Raytheon is the prime contractor for the GEM-T missile. – *Sputnik, Air Force Technology, Al Masdar News*

11. Qatar opens Al-Daayen naval base at Eastern coast

SEMAISIMA (14 July): Qatar has inaugurated its largest coast guard base 30 kilometres from Doha on Qatar's eastern coast.

The inauguration was attended by Prime Minister Abdullah bin Nasser bin Khalifa Al-Thani and commander of US Naval Forces in the Middle East, Vice- Admiral Jim Malloy.

The [total area](#) of the base is 639,800 sq. metres and the built-up area is 143,164 sq. metres divided into 25 buildings. The inauguration also saw the launch of new fleet of [Hercules-150](#) type boats. The [Interior Ministry of Qatar mentioned on twitter](#) that the 600,000-plus square-metre site aims to “facilitate the securing of

all territorial waters of the State and border posts.” It added that the Al-Daayen coast guard base includes a “sophisticated seaport,” training and medical facilities, civil defence offices and operating rooms. –*Arab News, Press TV, Middle East Eye, Peninsula Qatar*

12. Air strikes continue after Idlib truce takes effect

DAMASCUS (1 August): The Syrian government has [agreed](#) to a “conditional ceasefire” in war-torn northwestern Syria, after weeks of steady bombardment by Syrian and Russian forces targeting rebels and allegedly hitting civilians.

Few hours after putting into force the cease-fire agreement in the de-escalation zone in Idlib, [terrorist groups](#) fired five rockets on August 2, 2019 from Shahshabou Mountain near the Turkish observatory No. 10 towards the coast.

As a result, the Syrian army has resumed operations against armed rebels in [Idlib](#), scrapping a ceasefire in the last opposition-held stronghold. In a statement carried by state media, the army accused the rebels of violating the truce that was brokered during talks in [Kazakhstan](#) following a three-month campaign supported by Russia.

They said, “Armed terrorist groups, backed by Turkey, refused to abide by the ceasefire and launched many attacks on civilians in surrounding areas. The armed forces have resumed their military operations against

terrorists. – *SANA, Syrian Observatory of Human Rights*

13. Syrian troops close to rebel-held Idlib town

DAMASCUS (18 August): The Syrian army has [advanced](#) to the “outskirts” of the crucial southern Idlib town of Khan Shaykhun. The Syrian Observatory of Human Rights [claims](#) that at least 45 rebel and 17 pro-government fighters were killed in fighting around Khan Shaykhun on August 17 and 18, 2019.

The rebel forces reportedly [withdrew](#) from the town of Khan Shaykhun, leaving it to be seized by the Syrian military. This is the first time Khan Shaykhun has been in government hands since 2014. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says that rebels also withdrew from their remaining territory in Hama province, which would have been encircled once Khan Shaykhun fell.

The main rebel group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, is disputing all of this claims it has simply “redeployed” its forces. Meanwhile, the Turkish military says it [will not abandon](#) the observation post. They also subtly [accuse](#) Russia of not fulfilling its obligation to rein in the Syrian military and protect Turkish forces in the area, while Moscow maintains that it was Turkey’s failure to meet its obligations to disarm Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and reopen Syria’s M4 and M5 highways that has led to this situation. The concern now for Turkey is minimizing the displacement and avoiding another wave of Syrian refugees, though

there may not be much they can do in that regard given that Russia is involved. – *MENA, Al Jazeera, Aawsat, Al Monitor*

14. Syria rejects US-Turkey Safe Zone

DAMASCUS (08 August): The US has reportedly [sent a team](#) to southeastern Turkey to discuss the details of a possible safe zone in northern Syria. They have also agreed to set up a “joint operations center” to oversee the implementation of the safe zone. The deal has been negotiated, notably, without the input of any actual Syrians. And it seems to be getting a [mixed reception](#) from them. The Syrian government, for example, says it “categorically and clearly rejects the agreement.” Syrian Kurds, on the other hand, seem to be keeping a more open mind, with one Kurdish politician that the agreement “may mark the start of a new approach but we still need more details.”

Details are in short supply, however. Specifically, neither the Turks nor the US have [explained](#) how wide this safe zone will be, nor have they specified whether it will be jointly patrolled by Turkish and US forces or just patrolled by the Turks. That said, the Kurds may now have to swallow whatever deal Washington has negotiated—Damascus seems to be blaming them in part for the safe zone project, so the chances of a Kurdish rapprochement with Bashar al-Assad don’t seem high at the moment. – *Gulf Today, Al-Monitor*

15. Kurdish protest against ousting of city mayor

ANKARA (24 August): Kurdish protesters [hit](#) the streets in the city of Diyarbakır and in other parts of southeastern Turkey on Tuesday to protest Ankara's decision to remove the mayors of three major regional cities—Diyarbakır, Mardin and Van—because they are members of the People's Democratic Party and thus, as far as the Turkish government is concerned, of the Kurdistan Workers' Party.

Riot police responded by beating protesters with clubs, blasting them with water cannons, and arresting at least 400 people. – *Al Monitor*

16. Turkey continues to receive S-400 defence system

ANKARA (24 July): Turkey is continuing to [take delivery](#) of its new Russian-made S-400 air defence system, and Turkish officials now seem to be making a big deal out of the fact that they've technically only been suspended—not removed—from the F-35 programme as a result.

But while Donald Trump may be reluctant to punish Turkey, he is under a lot of pressure to do so from an [unlikely source](#): Republicans in Congress.

A group of 45 Republican senators met with Trump to urge him to sanction Ankara – *Turkish Minutes, Al Monitor*

17. Suspected ISIS arson attacks

BAGHDAD (15 August): The Iraqi government does not seem to be investigating the spate of fires that keep destroying acres of cropland across central and northern Iraq. In fact, Baghdad has allegedly been drastically under-reporting the extent of the problem and blaming it all on accidents or natural causes. But that explanation is not sitting well with [Iraqi farmers](#): The fires have particularly affected Sunni and Yazidi communities.

Near Hawija, one of the last towns to be [freed from Isis](#) – and a place where militants retain a presence – farmers braved the threat of guerrilla-style attacks, only to see their harvest go up in flames. In Sinjar, the fires have torched the livelihoods of Yazidis who had begun to return after ISIS drove them from their ancestral land in 2014.

It is likely that some of the fires have been accidental or natural but some have also been deliberately set, either by ISIS, other organized groups, or as a result of purely localized disputes. – *The Arab Weekly*

18. Iran seizes Iraqi tanker

TEHRAN (05 August): Iranian media has reported that officials have [seized](#) yet another tanker, this time near Farsi Island in the middle of the Persian Gulf. This vessel, reportedly Iraqi in origin, was allegedly smuggling Iranian fuel and was taken into custody along with its seven crew members. Iraq's oil ministry is denying any link to the ship, which is probably owned by a private Iraqi merchant. It is the third oil tanker the

Iranians have seized since mid-July. - *The Middle East Monitor*

14. Britain frees Iranian oil tanker

TEHRAN (15 August): Authorities in Gibraltar have [released](#) the Iranian oil tanker *Grace 1*, which they seized in July on suspicion of shipping oil to Syria.

The Trump administration is threatening to [slap sanctions](#) on any country or entity that has anything to do with Iran's *Adrian Darya-1* oil tanker, which was released from its detention in Gibraltar over the weekend.

The vessel is reportedly approaching Greece, but there's no indication it plans to stop there. That also means it is heading in the direction of Syria, which Iranian authorities reportedly promised the people in Gibraltar that it wouldn't do. The administration says it will "act" if the vessel looks like it's going to Syria, though it hasn't been more specific than that. – *Kayhanlife, oilprice.com*

15. Iran satellite launch looms despite US curbs

TEHRAN (25 August): Satellite photos show [activity](#) at Iran's Imam Khomeini Space Centre suggesting that Tehran is going to try for the third time this year to put a satellite in orbit.

The first two attempts had failed. The US opposes any Iranian space activity and argues that its entire space programme is just a cover for its ballistic missile programme. – *Lebanon Network*

16. Emergency talks on Iran nuclear deal in Vienna

TEHRAN (28 July): Parties to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal excluding the US [met in Vienna](#) for talks on salvaging the accord that were "constructive," according to Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi. He did not go into any details, however it seems the discussions were not very productive. Iranians appear to be [treating](#) the British seizure of their tanker, *Grace 1*, in Gibraltar in July as a violation of the nuclear deal, which does not bode well for prospects of maintaining Iran's compliance with it. They have also [warned](#) that deploying a European naval force in the Persian Gulf to protect shipping, as the British government has proposed, would be "provocative." But new Prime Minister Boris Johnson's desire for closer ties with Washington apparently won out over that consideration and the country has joined a US-led effort to do so.

In addition, the Australian and [Bahrain](#) government says it will [contribute](#) military assets to a US-led mission to protect shipping in the Strait of Hormuz. Interestingly, the Chinese government also [might sign](#) onto the US effort, which could provide cover for other countries to participate. – *The Middle East Monitor, Al Jazeera, Rudaw, The National, Khaleej Times*

17. Iran 'plans' to restart Arak reactor

TEHRAN (28 August): According to Iranian media reports the head of Iran's

Atomic Energy Organization, Ali Akbar Salehi, is planning to “restart” work at Iran’s nuclear reactor at Arak.

Arak is a “heavy water” reactor, which without going into details means that it produces plutonium that can be reprocessed into material for weapons. The nuclear deal provided for China and the United Kingdom to help convert the reactor to a design that generates less plutonium.

It is not clear whether Salehi was referring to working on a redesigned reactor or on the older, plutonium generating reactor. - *Reuters*

18. US sanctions Iran Foreign Minister

TEHRAN (01 AUGUST): It is reported that the Trump administration’s decision to sanction Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif came only after Zarif had turned down an offer, extended by Senator Rand Paul, to meet with Donald Trump. Zarif reportedly told Paul that the decision to meet Trump in the Oval Office was not his to make; he would have to consult with Tehran. Zarif then reportedly took the offer back to Tehran, where Iranian officials turned it down. That likely opened the room for John Bolton and Mike Pompeo to convince Trump that sanctioning Zarif would be an appropriate response to what Trump likely perceives as a rebuke. – *Tehran Times, Hurriyet Daily*

19. Syrian refugees in Lebanon fear deportation

BEIRUT (25 JULY): Lebanese authorities are reportedly cracking down on undocumented Syrian refugees, renewing concerns that these refugees are at risk of being unfairly deported and mistreated. Growing reports of raids over the past few weeks follow a Lebanese government drive against undocumented foreign labour, a move Syrians feared is aimed at earmarking them. As the Syrian crisis enters its ninth year, there are around 1.5 million Syrian refugees in neighbouring Lebanon – more refugees per capita than any other country in the world – and most are undocumented – *Lebanon Breaking News, Al Jazeera*

20. Fear of oil tanker explosion off Yemen coast

SANA’A (23 July): An abandoned oil tanker remains anchored near the Yemeni port of Ras Issa that apparently poses an imminent environmental threat that is difficult to resolve because of Houthi resistance. The tanker’s hull is eroding, raising the possibility of a major oil spill, and to make matters worse gases have undoubtedly built up inside the vessel, raising the possibility of an explosion followed by a major oil spill.

The Houthis are reportedly preventing a United Nations team from boarding the craft to assess the situation because they want assurances that they can sell the oil. The vessel holds over one million barrels of oil and is single-hulled. – *The National*

21. Lebanon says Israel threatens infrastructure

BEIRUT (24 July): Israel's United Nations ambassador, Danny Danon, [told](#) the Security Council on Tuesday that Iran has begun using the Port of Beirut (which he called the "Port of Hezbollah") to smuggle weapons to Hezbollah.

The Lebanese government accused Danon of attempting to pre-justify an attack on Lebanon and of threatening Lebanese infrastructure. – *The Middle East Monitor*

22. US-Israel test Arrow 3 anti-ballistic system

ALASKA (28 July): Israel and the US revealed that they have tested the Arrow 3 anti-ballistic weapon in Alaska. The announcement was made by the US Missile Defense Agency (MDA) on July 28, 2019, which said that "the Arrow 3 interceptor successfully demonstrated an engagement capability against the exo-atmospheric target during the test...Preliminary analysis indicates that test objectives were successfully achieved".

The tests were conducted in a joint effort between the US MDA and the Israel Missile Defence Organization of the [Directorate of Defence Research and Development](#). During the tests the Raytheon AN-TPY2 radar was also used which is not part of the Israeli missile defence architecture. – UPI

23. Israel Plans To Attack Houthis In Yemen

JERUSLEAM (22 August): Kuwaiti newspaper *Al-Jarida* claimed that Israel is

planning to target Houthi rebels and [Hezbollah in Yemen](#), near the Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb separating the Red Sea from the Gulf of Aden. According to the source, the Mossad and Military Intelligence are closely observing the Iranian attempts to deliver weapons, including missiles and drones to rebels, which can be potentially used [for terrorist strikes against the region's maritime network](#).-*The Jerusalem Post*

24. Nasrallah denies arms smuggling charges

BEIRUT (26 July): Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah completely denied an Israeli claim that his organization was smuggling Iranian weapons into Lebanon via the Port of Beirut. Earlier this week, the evidence revealing Iran using civilian transport routes to supply weapons to [its Lebanon-based Shi'a proxy were produced in the UNSC](#) by the Israeli UN envoy Danny Danon. Nasrallah denounced and declined Danon's presentation by labelling it "baseless," and asserted it was meant to "lay the groundwork for Israel to take over operations at seaports and airports and achieve what it was unable to do in the Second Lebanon War".

In response, IDF spokesperson (Arabic-language) Avichay Adraee, noted "Nasrallah is under great pressure due to economic distress and talks in Lebanon that he is using civilian infrastructure in Lebanon for military purposes. Now he has chosen [to deny the charge about the use of the Port of Beirut to bring in equipment for his missile project](#)."- *Algemeiner.com*

25. IRGC commander dies in Israeli strike in Iraq

JERUSALEM (31 July): Iran's Young Journalists Club news agency reported that a senior Quds Force commander was killed when a missile fuel-storage facility exploded during the July 19, 2019, strike on an Iraqi military base.

According to the news agency the name of the commander of the Quds Force was Abu Alfazl Sarabian and his funeral service was held in Tehran before Sarabian's body was returned for burial in his hometown of Kermanshah.

The attack targeted the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Force (Hashd al-Shaab) in Armeli in the Salah a-Din governorate of Iraq, north of Baghdad. Iraqi sources said Sarabian was killed as a result of an explosion [in a storage area for solid fuel for missiles](#). — Jewish News Syndicate

ECONOMY

26. KSA to build largest wind farm in West Asia

DUBAI (30 July): Middle East's largest wind farm is to be constructed in Al-Jouf region of Saudi Arabia. The Dumat Al-Jandal wind project will generate electricity that would be sufficient to power 70,000 homes in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and reduce carbon emissions of [880,000 tons](#) every year. Saudi government intends to develop 30 solar and wind projects over the next nine years as part of a \$50 billion programme to boost power generation and cut oil consumption.

The \$500 million project will be developed by a consortium led by France's EDF and Abu Dhabi's Masdar. The project will supply electricity in adherence to the 20-year power purchase agreement with the Saudi Power Procurement Company which is a subsidiary of the state-owned Saudi Electricity Company.

The project is part of the Saudi plan to incorporate 5GW of wind power into its grid. [Danish Company Vestas](#) is responsible for the supply of wind turbine technology along with the execution of engineering, procurement and construction (EPC) works for the project. — *The National, Arab News*

27. Saudi, Kuwait for oil output from neutral zones

DAMMAM (4 July): Saudi Arabia and Kuwait made headway in restoring oil output from neutral zones after a meeting held in June in Riyadh.

Saudi Minister of State for Energy Prince Abdulaziz Bin Salman visited Kuwait to discuss a resumption of oil production after the completion of all the technical issues.

The 'neutral zone' has not produced anything since the two countries had a spat with each other in 2014-15.

The barren strip of land is spread over 2,200 square miles and has the potential of producing [500,000 bpd](#).

However, the restoration of oil output will not add much to the world market as Saudi

Arabia and Kuwait split the crude produced there within their respective OPEC output quotas and OPEC has already extended production cuts into early [2020](#). *Asharq Al-Awsat, World Oil*

28. US does not need Middle East oil: Trump

WASHINGTON (20 AUGUST): US President Donald Trump in a visit to Shell Pennsylvania Petrochemicals Complex [told a gathering](#) that the US is seeking to dominate the energy market, and no longer needs oil from the Middle East.

He noted that there are “very few American boats” in the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic chokepoint that has been at the centre of geopolitical conflict in recent months.

“...We have very few boats going there anymore because we have our own oil and gas,” Trump said. “We don’t need it from the Middle East anymore.” He noted that “what we want now is not independence; we want American energy dominance.” – *White House govt, Oil and Gas Price. com*

29. US removes Iranian oil from global market

TEHRAN (22 August): US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [told](#) MSNBC that 2.7 million barrels per day of Iranian crude has been removed from global markets due to US sanctions against the nation. “We have managed to take almost 2.7 million barrels of crude oil off of the market, denying Iran the wealth to create their terror campaign around the world, and we have managed to

keep the oil markets fully supplied,” he said. He expressed confidence in the US government’s ability to continue this strategy. Meanwhile, the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and its allies committed in December 2018 to cut production by 1.2 million barrels per day to cut down a potential inventory build-up as global demand appears to be weakening. – *Economic Times*

30. Gazprom Neft produces 100-millionth barrel of oil at Badra field

BAGHDAD (20 AUGUST): The cumulative [production](#) at the Badra field in the five years since it went into commercial operation has reached 100 million barrels – the first shipment of liquid hydrocarbons having taken place in 2014.

Oil production at the field stands at more than 1.8 million tonnes (13.5 million barrels) since the start of 2019. Sergei Karavaev, executive director, Gazpromneft-Badra, commented: “The 100-millionth barrel of oil produced at the Badra field is a major landmark in this asset’s development. – *Rebuilding Iraq*

31. Iran starts new oil exploration projects

TEHRAN (05 August): The director of the exploration department of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) [announced](#) the start of a new generation of exploration activities in the northeast of the country.

He stated that exploration activities were now regarded as a priority by the NIOC as

emphasised by Iranian Minister of Petroleum, Bijan Zangeneh.

“Although exploration in the east of the country is expensive and with high risk, given the region's long distance from the country's energy center, exploration in the northeast is a top priority for the National Iranian Oil Company; I expect that within two years, a drilling rig would be operational in the Kopeh Dagh region,” the head of NIOC, Seyyed Saleh Hendi said. The official said that the value of the contracts was \$5 billion. – *Arabian Industry*

INDIA AND THE REGION

32. UAE Foreign Minister visits India

NEW DELHI (8 July): Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the United Arab Emirates, paid an [official visit](#) to India along with a senior level delegation from July 7-9, 2019.

He held talks with his newly-appointed counterpart Shri S. Jaishankar and discussed ways to boost cooperation in key sectors including [trade and energy](#).

He also participated in a business roundtable interaction with CEOs of Indian companies on July 8.

The Indian [Ministry of External Affairs](#) press release mentioned that the visit aimed to provide the two sides with an opportunity to explore new areas of cooperation to further strengthen their

Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. – *MEA, The Hindu, Khaleej Times*

33. Israel tourism roadshow in Delhi

MUMBAI (23 July): The Israel Ministry of Tourism (IMOT) organized a roadshow in New Delhi to improve business ties with the Indian travel trade fraternity. During the event the team interacted with over 300 key travel and tour operators, MICE providers, up-market leisure operators and media personnel.

The Israeli delegation was led by the newly-appointed Director of Tourism for India & Philippines markets, Sammy Yahia along with Judah Samuel, Director – Marketing, Israel Ministry of Tourism, India and included representative partners from the tourism industry of Israel. Commenting on the roadshow, Yahiya said, “The arrivals from India have exceeded expectations in the last few years and we have seen the same trend in 2019. India currently stands third in Asia among the top source markets for Israel. While keeping the current momentum going, the idea is to aggressively work towards increasing connectivity between [India & Israel by introducing new airlines to service the route](#)”. - Travel Trends Today

34. Egypt, India trade up 11.2% in four months

NEW DELHI (4 August): In the first four months of 2019, the exchange of trade between Egypt and India increased 11.2 per cent on a year-on-year basis, recording \$1.4 billion, highlighted in a report prepared by the Commercial Representative Office in New Delhi.

The report discovered that the trade deficit improved by \$382 million for India, marking a rise of 14.7 per cent during the January/April period. “Egypt's exports to India hiked 10 percent compared to the same period in 2018, whether for oil or non-oil exports”, the report said. Oil exports rose to \$304.39 million during 2019, up from \$276.27 million in the same period of 2018, marking an increase of 10.17 per cent, while non-oil exports hit \$199.6 million in [2019 period, compared to \\$181 million in 2018](#)”. - *Egypt Today*

35. India, Jordan discuss ways to boost trade

NEW DELHI (5 July): India-Jordan discussed ways to increase cooperation in the diverse areas such as customs, taxation and visa to promote trade and investment between the two countries.

The discussion was held during the 10th India-Jordan Trade and Economic Joint Committee meeting which was held in Delhi and was co-chaired by the [Commerce and Industry Minister, Nirmala Sitaraman and Yarub Qudah from Jordan](#).

During the meeting the two leaders inked a revised economy and trade cooperation agreement as well. – *The Indian Express*

36. India complying with Iran sanctions

New Delhi (21 August): By continuing to work with Iran on the Chabahar Port, [India](#) does not violate US sanctions on Tehran, according to a Washington official dealing with Iran.

The Special Representative for Iran, Brian Hook said that, “We have no evidence that India is running afoul of US sanctions.” The Chabahar Port that India is developing in Iran is close to the Afghanistan border on the Gulf of Oman. It is an alternative outlet for landlocked Afghanistan, which is otherwise dependent on Pakistani ports that Islamabad does not allow to be used for sending Indian aid to Afghanistan.

In May the administration of US President Donald Trump ended the exemption it had given India and four others from its sanctions against buying oil from Iran and New Delhi has complied with the oil sanctions. While announcing the stricter sanctions, the US remained silent on the Chabahar Port for which it had granted India a waiver in November.

The State Department had said at that time that the Chabahar exemption “relates to reconstruction assistance and economic development for Afghanistan”. – *Free Press Journal*

37. Nine Indian sailors freed from seized tanker

NEW DELHI (26 July): Iran has released nine Indian mariners it had held after seizing a foreign tanker that it claimed was smuggling Iranian oil.

The tanker named *The Riah*, which is based in the United Arab Emirates but registered in Panama, was seized in July in the Strait of Hormuz.

Subsequently, Iran freed 18 Indians from the seized Britain tanker, *The Sterno*. Iran seized the tanker to retaliate seizure of an Iranian tanker by British forces at Gibraltar. India remains engaged with Iran for the release of its citizens on board the tanker. Apparently, Delhi used its good offices with Tehran to secure the release.

39. Yemen government in exile calls for assistance from India

SANA'A (21 August): The exiled government of Yemen has sought assistance from India after armed rebels staged a coup last week and took over government buildings in the temporary capital of Aden.

“We want India to open its eyes to this crisis and intervene in a way that it sees fit. We would like the Government of India to respond to this situation in the same manner that it would if someone tried to divide India,” said Yahya Yahya Ghobar, Consul-General of Yemen in Mumbai.

Yemen is the centre of what the UN has termed “the worst man-made humanitarian crisis” in the world. After Iran-backed Houthi rebels captured the capital Sana’a in 2015, President Abdrabuh Mansour Hadi and his ministers fled to Saudi Arabia. – *The Indian Express*

40. Gulf Indian workers file 9,771 complaints

NEW DELHI (17 July): Replying to a question by a Lok Sabha member from Kerala, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar informed the House that 9,771 complaints have been filed by Indian workers in the Gulf in 2019.

The maximum number of complaints have been received from Kuwait (2377) followed by Saudi Arabia (2244), Oman (1764), UAE (1477), Qatar (1459) and Bahrain (450) in that order. Most of the complaints are regarding non-payment of salaries and denial of legitimate labour rights including non-issuance/renewal of residence permits, non-payment/grant of overtime allowance, lack of weekly holidays, longer working hours, refusal to grant exit/re-entry permits for visit to India, refusal to allow the worker to exit on final exit visa, non-provision of medical and insurance facilities and non-payment of compensation upon death. – *The Times of India*

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