



West Asia Watch

Trends & Analysis



**West Asia
Centre**



INSTITUTE FOR DEFENCE
STUDIES & ANALYSES
रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

Editor:
Dr Meena Singh Roy

Editor Coordinator
Dr Prasanta Kumar Pradhan

Editorial Team:
Dr Prasanta Kumar Pradhan
Dr Adil Rasheed
Md Muddassir Quamar

Copy Editor:
Vivek Kaushik

West Asia Centre

**Institute for Defence Studies and
Analyses**

**No. 1, Development Enclave,
Rao Tula Ram Marg, Delhi Cantt,
New Delhi – 110 010**

Tel. (91-11)2671 7983,

Fax: (91-11)2615 4191

Website: <http://www.idsa.in>

- Editorial
- Erdogan's Approach Unhelpful for India-Turkey Bilateral Ties
Md. Muddassir Quamar
- Prime Minister Modi's visit to Saudi Arabia
Prasanta Kumar Pradhan
- Disputes flare among non-ISIS jihadists in Syria
Adil Rasheed
- Interview by Meena Singh Roy with *Dr. Ali Chegeni*,
Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran
- West Asia News Survey
(Prepared by Centre Members)

EDITORIAL

West Asia Amidst Public Protests and International Diplomacy

The West Asian region witnessed major public protests in Iraq and Lebanon and diplomatic activities on part of major powers like Russia and the US and India and Pakistan. A weak economy, corruption, lack of reforms and political instability led the people of Iraq and Lebanon towards protest against their respective governments. As these anti-government protests intensified in October, the Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri offered to resign and Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi called on the Iraqi Parliament to approve a cabinet reshuffle. In the Syrian theatre, the ISIS suffered another blow with the confirmation of the deaths of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Abu Hassan al-Muhajir. US- Iran tensions continued during September-October 2019, with the Trump administration imposing further sanctions under its “maximum pressure” policy. In fact, even the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) had to pull out of a project to develop Iran’s large South Pars gas field in the Persian Gulf. The CPNC invested in the project last year after French oil giant Total pulled out in the face of US sanctions.

In the arena of International diplomacy, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Saudi Arabia and the UAE in October, while the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made a stopover in the UAE on his way to Saudi Arabia in September. From the UAE’s and Saudi Arabia’s perspective, their increasing engagement with Russia is part of their multi-vector foreign policy. However, for Moscow, this reflects its desire to increase its footprint in the West Asian region to meet both its economic and strategic goals. Russia offered cooperation in the space sector to the UAE. Increasing engagement of the Gulf Countries with Russia and China needs to be viewed in the context of changing US policy towards the region. These diplomatic engagements between Russia and Gulf partners in no way reflect a distancing of Saudi Arabia and the UAE from their strategic partner, the US. The Gulf States view their partnership with the US as a counterbalance to other stronger actors and mainly to counter the increasing threat emanating from Iran and its influence in the region. In September, the UAE announced its intention to join the US-led maritime coalition called the International Maritime Security Construct.

India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid a two-day visit to Saudi Arabia to further consolidate the strategic partnership with its important Gulf partner. During the visit both countries focused on cementing their cooperation in various sectors like security, finance, energy and security.

With the aim of playing a more active role in the Gulf region, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan paid a visit to Iran and Saudi Arabia. This visit was more about showcasing the Pakistani leader's image of being an enabler and facilitator of talks between two rivals, Iran and Saudi Arabia. He offered the use of the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, as a neutral venue for the Saudi and Iranian leaders to meet to "iron out their differences". President [Rouhani welcomed](#) Prime Minister Khan's initiative by stating, "We openly welcome any goodwill gesture by Pakistan for providing more peace and stability for the whole region and we are ready to assist Pakistan for providing full peace and stability for the whole region." However, there was no official statement appreciating Imran Khan's offer to facilitate talks from Saudi Arabia.

An updated regional [peace proposal](#) was unveiled by President Rouhani at the 2019 United Nations General Assembly. This regional peace proposal has been termed as the Hormuz Peace Endeavour, or HOPE. The Iranian peace plan is based on the premise that all regional states have the responsibility to ensure peace, stability and prosperity in the region and together with the global community, have a common vital interest in maintaining freedom of navigation and energy security for all. This has been viewed by many as a new regional security architecture that keeps external powers like the US out. Some also view this as a counter to Washington's long talked about idea for an "Arab NATO" whose aim would be explicitly to oppose and isolate Iran. For now, both the proposals have not received much acceptance in the region.

Iran-Saudi tensions escalated after the Saudi oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais were hit by drones. It also instigated the largest spike in global oil prices since the Gulf war of 1991. In the wake of the high-impact attacks, Saudi Arabia shut down its oil pipeline that carries 0.2 million barrels per day (bpd) of Arab Light crude from Saudi Aramco to the Bahrain Petroleum Company. [Saudi Arabia's energy minister](#) said that the attacks caused an interruption of an estimated 5.7 million barrels in crude supplies and threatened world economy.

In its current edition, the newsletter examines new developments in the region during September-October 2019. The themes covered include Turkish President Erdogan's approach and its impact on India-Turkey relations; an analysis of disputes among non-ISIS jihadists in Syria and how India-Saudi relations have been cemented during Prime Minister Modi's visit to Riyadh. The issue also carries an exclusive interview with Dr. Ali Chegeni, Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to India.

Erdogan's Approach Unhelpful for India

Turkey Bilateral Ties

Md. Muddassir Quamar

On the eve of his visit to India in April 2017, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (in)famously quipped during a [television interview](#) that Turkey will be willing to facilitate a “multilateral dialogue” to resolve the conflict between India and Pakistan over Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). In the same interview, he had hoped for improvement in bilateral ties between India and Turkey and underlined the potentials for enhancing trade and commercial relations. The same sentiments were expressed by Erdogan during various interactions with the business and strategic community in New Delhi during the visit. Two years later, in April 2019, Ibrahim Kalin President Erdogan's advisor visited New Delhi; and days later, Deputy Foreign Minister Sedat Onal arrived in India, and both the Turkish officials expressed the same thoughts of the need to tap the [business and investment potentials](#) between the two G20 economies. But only a few months down the line, Turkey has adopted an aggressive approach towards India over its decision to abrogate Article 370 of the Indian constitution.

Earlier, the dichotomy in Turkey's pro-Pakistan approach on J&K and wanting to improve business ties with India was considered a beginning of Turkey de-

hyphenating its approach towards India and Pakistan. However, developments after August 5 decision on Article 370 suggest that the situation has taken a different turn. Erdogan's aggressive criticism of India's decision to abrogate the Article 370 ending special status of the state of J&K underlines the conundrum between Turkey's confrontational approach over J&K and desire for improving commercial relations.

On the Indian decision, for example, Erdogan on August 5, held a telephonic conversation with Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan and assured of Turkey's “[steadfast support](#).” Later during an annual meeting of Turkish diplomats and foreign missions officials in Ankara, Erdogan reportedly stated that he had a “fruitful” conversation with Khan and that “[Ankara would get in touch with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi in hopes to reduce tension mounting in the region](#).” Simultaneously, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement expressing concern over India's move to annul Article 370 of its constitution. Issued on August 5, the [statement read](#): “We are concerned that the annulment of the Article 370 of the Constitution of India on 5 August 2019 which accords

special status to Jammu-Kashmir could further increase the existing tension.”

In the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) too, Turkey has been instrumental in issuing statements favourable to Pakistan concerning J&K. The OIC contact group on J&K (formed in 1994) held an emergency meeting in Jeddah on August 6 and issued statement expressing concerns over the Indian move. Turkey supported the Pakistani initiative to hold a consultation on J&K in the United Nations Security Council. After the informal consultation in the UNSC on J&K on August 16, Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement urging the UN to “[play a more active role](#)” in resolving the dispute on Kashmir between India and Pakistan. Later, on September 24, during his [speech at the general debate at the 74th session](#) of the United Nations General Assembly, Erdogan raised the issue on the Indian decision to revoke the Article 370 and argued that the people in Kashmir are “besieged” by India.

Even when Erdogan had in 2017 said that Turkey is willing to host a “multilateral dialogue” to resolve the Kashmir conflict, eyebrows had been raised as India has always maintained that J&K is an internal matter of India and that the problems between India and Pakistan can only be resolved through bilateral dialogue and that too only after Pakistan ends the policy of sponsoring cross-border terrorism in India. At the time, it was seen as a provocation, but New Delhi chose to be

poised in its response and had ignored the statement for the sake of improving bilateral ties.

The situation, however, has changed now and New Delhi is no longer willing to accept Ankara’s interventionist approach in its internal matter. On October 4, the Spokesperson of the India’s Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Raveesh Kumar, while responding to queries from the members of the media during a [weekly briefing](#) said that India “regret[s] that since 6th August there have been repeated statements by the Turkish government, from their foreign ministry on a matter which is completely internal to India. These statements are factually incorrect, biased and unwarranted. We [India] call upon the Government of Turkey to get a proper understanding of the situation on the ground before they make any further statements on this issue.”

On October 10, a day after Turkey’s military offensive in Syria, deemed “Operation Peace Spring,” the [MEA issued a statement expressing](#) “deep concern” over the “unilateral military offensive” underlining that “Turkey’s actions can undermine stability in the region and the fight against terrorism. Its action also has the potential for causing humanitarian and civilian distress.” Moreover, [media reports suggest](#) that a visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Turkey, planned for later this year, has been cancelled. Reports also suggest that India is [considering cancellation of the US\\$2.3](#)

[billion contact](#) signed in June this year between Hindustan Shipyard Limited (HSL) and Turkey's Anadolu Shipyard (TAIS). Though the latter decision is based on security considerations as TAIS has business links in Pakistan and Turkey is a major naval supplier to Pakistan.

Further, on October 22, the Indian Embassy in Ankara issued a [travel advisory](#) for Indians travelling to Turkey to "exercise utmost caution". Given the fact that Turkey attracts a large number of Indian tourists and has emerged as one of the favourite places for destination wedding, the travel advisory acquires significance. Apparently, Indian tourist arrival to Turkey during the first [six months of 2019 was 56 percent higher](#) than the same duration in 2018. The air traffic between India and Turkey is also on the upswing and currently [3,000 seats per week is available both ways](#) between the two countries. Turkish Airlines has been planning to expand its operations on this sector, especially to cater to the ever-growing Indian transit passengers travelling to various destinations across Europe and Africa via Ankara. However, both tourism and aviation sector might be affected given the current atmosphere in bilateral ties.

According to [The Hindu when quizzed about these issues](#), especially the cancellation of prime minister's visit and "expected" cancellation of the HSL-TAIS contract, Turkish ambassador in New Delhi Sakir Ozkan Torunlar suggested that the bilateral ties are not based on "one vertical" and that the

commercial dimension of the ties should not be affected by the political dimension. He said "There may be one vertical, which doesn't make India happy, but in other areas, we can work. Turkey too has other issues like the presence of Fethullah Gulen-affiliated terror groups in India... but we don't bring that vertical on top of all other bilateral relations." It underlines that Ankara wants to make a distinction between its stand on J&K and the overall relations with India.

However, New Delhi thinks otherwise. For India, J&K is an internal matter and Turkey has no *locus standi* on the matter. Notably, India does not wish to take a zero-sum approach, as was visible from the uptick in the commercial relations despite the Turkish approach before the August 5. Nonetheless, New Delhi expects Turkey, like other members of the global community and the Islamic world, to respect its internal matters as well as take a more studied view of the situation in J&K. It is clear that New Delhi is no longer ready to tolerate Ankara's diatribe on India's internal matters while expecting business as usual on commercial front. It also demarcates a red line for the international community. For Ankara, it is important to understand that a confrontational approach on J&K will be unhelpful for bilateral relations with India.

(Md. Muddassir Quamar is Associate Fellow at West Asia Centre in the IDSA)

Prime Minister Modi's visit to Saudi Arabia

Prasanta Kumar Pradhan

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid an official visit to Saudi Arabia on 28-29 October 2019. India-Saudi Arabia relationship is on an upward trajectory under the Modi government. This was Modi's second visit to Saudi Arabia as Prime Minister following his previous visit in 2016. From the Saudi side, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman visited India in February 2019; and King Salman in 2014 as the then crown prince of Saudi Arabia. For Prime Minister Modi, Saudi Arabia is a key country in India's engagements with the extended neighborhood. In the recent years, India's engagements with Saudi Arabia have been strengthened in several key areas such as security, defence, energy and trade.

During his visit Prime Minister Modi participated in the third annual Future Investment Initiative Forum, dubbed as the 'Davos in the Desert', which is an annual investment forum held in Riyadh and delivered the keynote address. In his address, Prime Minister Modi highlighted a number of achievements and initiatives undertaken by India in order to end poverty and stimulate economic growth. He emphasised on the importance of innovation, technology, building infrastructure, skilled manpower and an environment for

business friendly governance for the advancement of the global business. He stated that India needs huge amounts foreign direct investment (FDI) in the future, as it is a fast growing economy and claimed that India is in the process of further liberalising its FDI policy. He also stated that India has gone up in all major global rankings in the performance of its economy such as in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index, Logistics performance Index and Global Innovation Index. He called upon the Saudi companies to invest in India and appreciated the decision of the Saudi ARAMCO to invest in India's West Coast refinery project, which would be the largest refinery in Asia. He showcased India's economic growth in recent years and appealed other countries including Saudi Arabia to be part of India's growth story.

During Prime Minister Modi's visit, India and Saudi Arabia signed [12 MoUs/Agreements](#) on a number of issues in Riyadh. The agreements are in the fields of establishment of the Strategic Partnership Council; Renewable Energy; Security Cooperation; combating illicit trafficking and smuggling of narcotic drugs; military acquisition, industries, research, development and technology;

Civil Aviation; medical products regulations; Small and Medium Enterprises; agreement between Foreign Service Institute, and Prince Saud Al Faisal Institute of Diplomatic Studies; Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserves and Stock Exchanges and Payments.

India and Saudi Arabia have signed strategic partnership agreement and both the countries have been working to further strengthen the relationship. The establishment of the Strategic Partnership Council will further streamline and enhance the achievement of their objectives. Though India and Saudi Arabia have signed a defence cooperation agreement, the agreement on military acquisition, industries, research, development and technology shows that both countries have developed mutual trust and confidence to engage in the sensitive defence sectors. The security cooperation agreement would further strengthen India-Saudi Arabia security cooperation. It must be mentioned that security cooperation between both the countries has been going on with active cooperation from both the countries. Earlier, in an [interview](#) to Saudi newspaper *Arab News* Modi stated, “Asian powers like India and Saudi Arabia share similar security concerns in their neighborhood. In that respect, I am happy that our cooperation, particularly in the field of counterterrorism, security and strategic issues, is progressing very well.” Saudi Arabia has deported a number of Indians wanted back in

India for several crimes and terrorism. India has also condemned the drone and missile attacks on the kingdom. Engaging with Saudi Arabia in the security arena will provide further boost to the existing cooperation between the two countries.

In Riyadh, Prime Minister Modi met with King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. These meetings focused on bilateral relations and regional issues. Saudi Arabia has reiterated its commitment towards India’s energy security and has agreed to take part in the India’s Strategic Petroleum Reserve. The signing of the MoU between Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserves Limited (ISPRL) and Saudi Aramco is a big step; and this is reflective of a growing Saudi commitment towards India’s energy security. India intends to achieve the strategic crude oil reserves of five million metric tons to face any untoward situation arising out of turbulence in the West Asian region. Saudi Arabia at present is the second largest crude oil supplier of India supplying around 16 percent of India’s total crude oil imports. Its commitment to the India’s Strategic Petroleum Reserves further reenergises India-Saudi energy partnership.

Agreements between the two countries on a wide range of issues including on crucial areas of trade, investment, energy, defence and security is a reflective of further strengthening of the comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries. Saudi Arabia has emerged as the key

pillar in Modi's West Asia policy. The Saudi rulers have also reciprocated Modi's continuous and expanding engagement with the kingdom. Modi's visit has provided further boost to the already vibrant India-Saudi Arabia relations.

(Dr. Prasanta Kumar Pradhan is an Associate Fellow at West Asia Centre in the IDSA)

Disputes flare among non-ISIS jihadists in Syria

Adil Rasheed

It was an unlikely spot for Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi to have holed himself in. When US Special Forces took out the diabolic ISIS chief in the village of Barisha in Syria's Idlib province, many strategic experts wondered why the terror fugitive did not opt for the relatively safer Al Anbar province of Iraq, but sought cover in an area controlled by Hayat Tahrir Al Sham (HTS), an Al Qaeda affiliate and a sworn enemy of ISIS. The two-storey building complex, which became his hideout, belonged to a [food merchant](#) from the terror group Hurras Al Din (Religious Guardians' Organization), an offshoot of Al Qaeda and an adversary of ISIS.

However, it appears that the terror chief may have had more on his mind than safety while moving to Idlib. Some strategic experts aver that he was there to revive the dwindling fortunes of ISIS by taking advantage of growing infighting within Al Qaeda ranks and affiliate groups in Syria. In fact, President Trump stated this proposition while officially announcing Baghdadi's death, when he stated that the ISIS leader's presence in Idlib was [part of a plan](#) to rebuild the terror group.

For its part, Al Qaeda sees opportunity for its own resurgence in the death of Al-Baghdadi and has reportedly started to wean away fighters from ISIS' ranks. Ever since ISIS was thrown out of Al Qaeda's fold in February 2014, the latter had branded Al-Baghdadi's Caliphate as "[illegitimate, too extreme and ultimately harmful](#)". Although Al Qaeda head honcho Ayman Al Zawahiri has not spoken about Baghdadi's killing so far, his supporters are said to be celebrating the incident on the Dark Web, where they are frequently found discussing "just how much of a big deal and opportunity they see with Baghdadi's death".

However, it is not just ISIS which is passing through an existential crisis; the same condition bedevils Al Qaeda and other jihadist groups, now mainly confined to Idlib controlled by HTS. The civil war in Syria which has made the country a hotbed for many jihadist organisations (mostly coming from around the world) have not only faced major reversals across several fronts in recent years, but have also entered into bitter internecine feuds over issues of leadership, territorial acquisitions and spoils of war.

Another issue of contention among Sunni jihadist groups has been the

growing role of Turkey in weaning away some of their moderate leaders and forces. With the announcement of withdrawal of US forces from Syria, Turkey has not only made a deep and blatant incursion into Syrian territory to create a so-called 'safe zone' with the alleged aim of uprooting Kurdish population on the border, it has also been reportedly hobnobbing with HTS leader Al Julani and urging him to demonstrate interest in public welfare and health schemes for the people of Idlib, so that the group can be absorbed in a [Sunni front against Shiite forces of Syria and Iran](#). For his part, Al Julani is said to have bitten the Turkish bait. However, the signs of an apparent change in Al Julani's ideology and approach has upset many hardcore jihadist groups allied to HTS, as they fear the growing closeness of the Idlib leader toward Turkey and international powers as contrary to their core beliefs. This has resulted in an [open expression of discontent](#) by rebel jihadist groups in Idlib, who have charged the HTS leadership with hypocrisy and betrayal.

In fact, the simmering discontent against Al Julani's leadership of HTS reached a peak in October when senior members of the group, including [Abu Al-Abd Ashda'a, publicly criticized](#) the HTS head and demonstrations were held both in favor of and against Al Julani in Idlib. To quell this criticism, a faction of foreign fighter groups supportive of Al Julani issued a statement on 7 October 2019, criticizing what they referred to as "the glaring injustice" faced by the HTS leadership and praised the organization for its

administration of the areas under its control. The statement was [signed by](#) the Turkestan Islamic Party, Uzbek Monotheism and Jihad Brigade, Caucasian Jaysh Al Muhajireen Wal Ansar, Harakat Al Muhajireen Al-Sunnah, Albanian Brigade, Arabian Al Ma'ali Confederation, Abu Khalid Al Turki Brigades, etc.

However, a quick and sharp [rebuttal](#) came from another "group of foreign fighters in Al Sham", who published an acerbic statement that very day with the title "Statement of Dissociation of the Immigrants [Fighters] to Syria from what was Thrust upon them by the People of Crime and Oppression". The [statement](#) made a veiled but stinging criticism of Al Julani himself, comparing him to the personality of the evil Pharaoh mentioned in the Quran. It [reads](#):

"We saw what happened in the past in Afghanistan where the parties exploited them for their internal wars and all those who refused to fight in their internal wars were forced to leave due to the pressure brought to bear on them and the blocking of any possibility for them to earn a living. They returned to their own countries where they were apprehended by the intelligence apparatuses and imprisoned. Worse things happened in Chechnya, in Bosnia, and Herzegovina...Today there is someone [i.e. Abu Muhammad Al Julani] who wants to utilize the immigrants as pawns with which to further his political ambitions and his Pharaonic dreams, and to attack his rivals and intimidate his opponents."

The intensity of hate within the so-called ‘jihadist brethren’ in this letter, directed specifically towards Al Julani, who supposedly controls Idlib province, shows the deep-seated animosity amongst the disillusioned terror groups. However, disunity among jihadist groups in Syria is not a new phenomena. The first major split in the ranks came when ISIS was itself thrown out of Al Qaeda’s fold in February 2014. Favoring Abu Mohammad Al Julani (leader of the Al Qaeda affiliate then titled Jubhat Al Nusra), Al Qaeda chief Ayman Al Zawahiri disavowed Al Baghdadi and the ISIS group nearly six years ago, when the latter refused to comply the head honcho’s decision to stop operating in Syria.

However, Al Zawahiri’s bonhomie with Al Julani was also [short-lived](#). In July 2016, Al Julani announced that his group was splitting from Al Qaeda and changed the name of his group from Jabhat ul Nusra to Jabhat Fateh Al Sham. One of the stated reasons for its split was to avoid giving Bashar the excuse of branding the group a terrorist organization and an Al Qaeda affiliated outfit, thereby making it a subject of coalition attacks. However, the US and UN agencies continued to regard Jabhat Fateh Al Sham as an Al Qaeda ally. By 2017, this newly minted group again changed its name by merging four other jihadist factions into its fold – Nour Al Din Zinki Movement, Ansar Al Din Front; Jaysh Al Sunnah and Liwa Al Haqq – and is now known as Hayat Tahrir Al Sham (HTS). Its aim is to become the grouping of Sunni militias

(“[melting pot of factions](#)”) fighting Bashar Al Assad’s regime.

In June 2018, HTS reiterated that it had no links with any terrorist group (including Al Qaeda) after the US blacklisted it as a terrorist organisation. However, the open and repeated disavowals of loyalty by HTS members of Al Qaeda have led to acrimonious exchanges between the two sides ever since and cause internecine feuds amongst their factions. It was the growing differences between HTS and a new Al Qaeda affiliate Hurras Al Deen in Syria that Al-Baghdadi was apparently seeking to exploit by taking shelter in the latter’s compound, where US Special Forces raided and killed the ISIS leader in later October. There have also been claims that [Turkey is conspiring to create](#) this wedge between HTS and Al Qaeda in order to wean Jolani loyalists for building its new Sunni front against Bashar Al-Assad’s forces.

However, these internal divisions within the jihadist ranks notwithstanding, the threat of terrorist attacks around the world has only grown following Baghdadi’s killings. In fact, just after Al Baghdadi’s death Al Qaeda-affiliated Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) posted an audio message of Abu Ubeydah Ahmad Omar, leader of Harakat Al Shabab Al Mujahideen faction urging jihadist groups to conduct terror strikes worldwide, even set [forest fires](#) in the US and Europe.

(Dr Adil Rashid is Research Fellow at West Asia Centre in the IDSA)

Interview with Dr. Ali Chegeni, Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran

H.E. Dr Ali Chegeni discussed security concerns, regional cooperation and matters of mutual interest in a free-wheeling chat with Dr Meena Singh Roy on October 21, 2019

“... Persian Gulf is in need of a comprehensive order with no foreign forces present in the region. It requires a security order which relies on regional countries cooperation”

1. How do you see the current security situation unfolding in the Persian Gulf region and its impact?

Given the current situation, the security order of the Persian Gulf region has been more complicated and fluid due to disruptive interventions by the US during the past decades which have disturbed the fabric of harmony, domestic dynamics, security order and the ecosystem of co-existence in the region.

But the good news is, recently, some allied players are gradually realizing that the US is no longer a reliable security guarantor. I do believe, this might be the harbinger of an evolving security order in the region without foreign intervention.

2. What are the key trends in the Iranian economy in the present context?

As expected, the reinstating of economic sanctions against Iran led to a tough economic situation last year. The most serious harm to the Iranian economy comes from the difficulty in exporting oil. But basically, Iran's economy has an inward-looking policy and has not been disproportionately integrated to the global economy during the last decades. Although, this trend has its own advantages and disadvantages, in the light of the current uncertainty in the global trade atmosphere and low integration in the global economy, Iran has been able to manage the US sanctions and survive, and there is even a possibility of a slight economic improvement in the coming years.

3. What are the strengths of the Iranian economy?

Despite the negative economic index, some of the economic data may suggest that the Iranian economy is gradually

accommodating to the new realities. Now the major strength of the Iranian economy comes from the stabilization of the local currency's exchange rate against the US dollar. After devaluation of the Rial in 2018, now its rate has stabilized in recent months, mainly due to the efforts of the authorities to stabilize the exchange rate, including counter measures against the black market in foreign currency trading.

Moreover from a broad perspective, given the dependence on domestic products, Iran's economy has been immunized against global economic shocks and US sanctions. Today, because of US sanctions, domestic production has boomed, as local products especially in the food industry have been more competitive in terms of price and quality.

4. How do you think Iran can reduce the negative impact of unilateral sanctions?

The US policy is doomed to failure, because Iran is a country that has been able to survive despite pressure, imposed war, brutal sanctions. Iran has been able to make progress, to make scientific achievements. Iran based on its previous experiences and an introverted economy empowered by culture of resistance, has successfully managed to withstand and bypass the US pressure.

Today, many economists in Iran believe that economic improvement is possible only through an “economy of resistance,” which mainly involves reducing Iranian

dependence on shaky global markets and foreign investment support which has been substantially hampered by US interference and sabotage. Knowing this, the government is also striving to continue increasing revenue from the export of non- oil products to neighbouring countries which will fuel more employment and sustainable growth.

5. Iran seems to be quite disappointed with the EU's approach in the present context? What in your opinion can EU do to help Iran?

As you know, the Iran nuclear deal was a significant achievement of European's foreign policy and it is in the interest of Europe to stay in the deal. But we have not seen Europe ready yet for an investment and for paying a price to save the deal. The EU's offer is too little to appease Iran and INSTEX will assist in humanitarian , but not in trading in oil which Iran is looking for.

6. How do you see Iran's regional approach? Who are the regional partners for Iran in economic terms to help Tehran in the current situation?

Iran's regional approach is based on dialogue which is the most efficient way to engage all neighbours. Such a regional forum should be governed by sovereignty, integrity, peace and stability of states. We have also suggested signing

a non-aggression pact with the Persian Gulf littoral states several times.

7. Is there any possibility of regional dialogue? Any prospects of Iran-Saudi dialogue?

The regional countries must understand each other's security concerns that they need to accept each other, as a reality. Indeed, acceptance is a major step in the conflict resolution measures. Today, the Persian Gulf is in need of comprehensive order with no foreign forces present in the region and it requires a security order which relies on cooperation of all countries in the region. In this regard, there is a strong will from the Iranian side to engage in a regional peace dialogue under the "Hormuz Hope Initiative" proposed by President Rouhani at the 74th United Nations General Assembly session for regional cooperation to ensure peace, energy security for producers and consumers and the freedom of navigation.

8. India-Iran relations are undergoing some difficulties because of the US unilateral sanctions. How would you assess the present status of bilateral relations between the two countries?

Both countries have always been friends and engaged with each other especially during tough times. We are sure that the Indian authorities will manage to do so in

line with their own national interest considering the friendly relations with Iran. Moreover, our relationship is multi-dimensional and is not limited to oil.

9. What can be the possible options for India and Iran to take their economic and energy ties forward?

Since 2011, Iran and India have been talking about their intention to promote settlements of trade in national currencies to reduce dependence on other currencies. At the moment there is hope that the Pasargad Bank branch operating in India can provide credit opportunities for small and medium entrepreneurs.

There is also plenty of opportunity for Indian companies to set up plants in sectors such as fertilizers, petrochemicals and refineries in Chabahar Free Trade Zone. This will be a joint investment as it will promote India's energy security while providing financial resources and employment opportunities to Iran.

More important, I do believe that the future of a bilateral relationship depends on the people of the two countries understanding each other. People-to-people contacts are dependent on the opportunities provided to the two countries' citizens to visit each other for official and non-official purposes.

WEST ASIA NEWS SURVEY

POLITICS

Anti-government protest erupts in Lebanon

Beirut (17 October): Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri [announced](#) on 20 October that his government has agreed on a package of reforms that would help to improve the Lebanese economy and appease the tens of thousands of people who have taken to the streets over the past several days to demand his resignation. Dozens of people [demonstrated](#) in downtown Beirut, while many more blocked roads across Lebanon, to protest the tax hikes that Lebanese politicians are considering for their 2020 budget. The new package includes a 50 percent cut in salaries for all current and former presidents, cabinet ministers, and members of parliament, which does have some populist appeal in a country where corruption is one of the main complaints. It also mandates that the Lebanese central bank and other financial institutions “contribute” \$3.3 billion to cut Lebanon’s 2020 budget deficit to almost zero. In addition, the reforms will privatize Lebanon’s telecommunications sector and make some unspecified changes to its electricity sector. The new deal has also ruled out tax increases for fear of further enraging the public. – *Nasqad.com, Al Jazeera*

Lebanese Prime Minister resigns over protest

Beirut (29 October): Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri has [offered his resignation](#) in the wake of 12 days of anti-

government protests that have rocked that country. The announcement of Hariri’s decision has apparently thrown demonstrators into a state of jubilation. Lebanese President Michel Aoun has to accept his resignation, and he appears to be [taking his time](#) about that—probably because Hariri’s resignation threatens to collapse the political house of cards that’s made Aoun’s presidency possible. – *Gulf News, Naharnet.com*

Iraqi’s protest over deteriorating economy

Baghdad (01 October): An estimated 3000 people [protested](#) in the streets of Baghdad since October over Iraq’s weak economy and the ineptitude and/or corruption of the Iraqi government. Demonstrators clashed violently with police as they attempted to enter Baghdad’s “Green Zone,” home largely to government offices and embassies. Multiple deaths have been reported of demonstrators when Iraqi security forces opened fire on the crowd, leading to international calls for Baghdad to rein in and investigate its security forces. Over 6100 people have been wounded, around 1000 of them security personnel. It was also reported that the protestors have been [chanting](#) anti-Iran slogans over its interference in Iraqi politics. Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi [called on](#) the Iraqi parliament to give him permission to rearrange his cabinet, in response to the protests. – *Human Rights Watch, Al Monitor, The Levant News*

Putin visits Saudi Arabia and UAE

MOSCOW (14 October): Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Saudi Arabia and UAE in October 2019. During his first visit to Saudi Arabia in a decade, Putin had discussion with the King Salman as well as the Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman. More than a dozen MoUs were signed during the visit which included the important fields of energy, petrochemicals, transport and artificial intelligence. [Muhammed bin Salman mentioned](#) that Saudi-Russian cooperation on energy would achieve stability. A senior Saudi foreign ministry official stated, "We believe that we can have strategic and strong ties with the United States while we develop our ties with Russia."

In the second leg of the visit Putin signed deals worth more than US\$1.3 billion in Abu Dhabi. The Emirati Crown Prince and the Russian President signed six agreements, including one on shared investments between Russia's sovereign wealth fund and the Emirati investment fund *Mubadala*. After meeting the Emirati astronaut Hazzaa Al Mansoori, [Putin said](#) "We are ready to continue providing all the necessary assistance to the United Arab Emirates in the space sector." *Reuters, Al-Jazeera*

Imran Khan visits Iran and Saudi Arabia

ISLAMABAD (16 October): Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan visited Iran and Saudi Arabia in October and offered to facilitate talks between the two countries. He also offered the use of the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, as a neutral venue for Saudi and Iranian leaders to meet to "iron out their differences" In Iran he met with Iranian President

Hassan Rouhani and Supreme Leader Ali Hosseini Khamenei and discussed with them about the situation in the region. After their meeting, President [Rouhani said](#), "We openly welcome any goodwill gesture by Pakistan for providing more peace and stability for the whole region and we are ready to assist Pakistan for providing full peace and stability for the whole region." During his visit to Saudi Arabia, Imran Khan met with the Saudi Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman and discussed regional political and security issues. But no statement appreciating the Imran Khan's offer to facilitate talks reflected in the Saudi official statement. The Saudi government statement mentioned that "During the meeting, Imran Khan and Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman reviewed strong ties between the two brotherly countries and fields of joint cooperation as well as ways of enhancing them." *Al Jazeera*

UAE to join US led Maritime Coalition

DUBAI (19 September): In the wake of the alleged Iranian attacks on oil tankers near the Strait of Hormuz, UAE announced to join the US led Maritime Coalition which is known as the International Maritime Security Construct. The announcement came after the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo arrived in the UAE on 19 September for a brief stopover after visiting Saudi Arabia. [Emirati Foreign Ministry official Salem al Zaabi](#) said that the UAE joined the coalition to "ensure global energy security and the continued flow of energy supplies to the global economy." The [operation area](#) of the maritime coalition covers the Strait of Hormuz, Bab Al Mandab, the Sea of Oman and the Arabian Gulf. The

multinational maritime alliance was proposed by the US in June 2019 after a number of oil tankers were attacked in the Persian Gulf. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UK and Australia are the other members of the maritime coalition. *NPR, Khaleej Times*

Oman rejects Netanyahu's promise to annex West Bank

MUSCAT (16 September): Oman has rejected Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's promise to annex West Bank. Oman's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a [statement](#) that "Oman reiterates its rejection of Netanyahu's recent statements on the Palestinians, and supports the Palestinian people in all efforts to establish an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital." Earlier, Netanyahu has announced his plan to annex the Jordan valley if he forms the government after the elections stating that "We will apply sovereignty in the Jordan Valley and the Northern Dead Sea as soon as the next government is established in the next Knesset." The Palestinian Authority vehemently criticized the plan to annex West Bank. Also, many other countries including [Jordan and Turkey](#) have expressed their condemnation of Netanyahu's statement. *Jerusalem Post, The Guardian*

Qatar extending projects in Africa

DOHA (6 September): Qatar seeks increasing development projects in Africa. [Lolwah Al Khater](#), spokesperson for Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that Qatar and East African nations enjoy close and distinguished relations based on historical ties and a common desire to achieve economic, educational

and social prosperity for the people of the region. The Qatar Fund for Development has contributed grants and concessional loans to East African countries exceeding US\$ 4 billion over the last eight years. Doha plans to construct a port in the Somali town of Hobyo to strengthen Qatar-Somalia relations. Two months ago, Qatar transported 12 terror attack victims from Somalia to a hospital in Doha while Qatar Airways commenced operations in Mogadishu. Qatar's Ministry of Transport and Communication [Jassim Saif Ahmed Al Sulaiti](#) said that the port will achieve multiple economic benefits for Somalia in terms of investment returns and major business opportunities. It will bolster the commercial relationship with new markets in Africa and enhance access to global markets, in addition to providing maritime services to vast areas in Somalia. *Al Monitor, Qatari Ministry of Transport and Communications*

France gives one month to get US-Iran on negotiating table

Tehran (03 October): The French government is [stating](#) that the US and Iran have one more month to get on the negotiating table. In his remarks to parliament, Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian was referring to Iran's plans to further reduce its compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal come November. At some point the Iranians may reduce their compliance beyond the point where European governments will be willing to continue trying to salvage the accord. Of course, if European governments start imposing their own penalties on Tehran it will reward Donald Trump's efforts to scuttle the nuclear deal, so it's unclear what this French ultimatum is supposed

to achieve. If anything it incentivizes the Trump administration to stay the course.
– *Your Middle East News*

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's regional diplomatic initiative: HOPE

Tehran (25 September): President Rouhani [presented](#) an updated version of Iran's proposal at the 2019 United Nations General Assembly, which he dubbed the Hormuz Peace Endeavor, or HOPE. Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif briefly [explained](#) the contents of the proposal during a special session of the UN Security Council. HOPE, according to Zarif, is based on the fact that all regional states have the responsibility to ensure peace, stability and prosperity in the region and, together with the global community, have a common vital interest in maintaining freedom of navigation and energy security for all. The Iranian goal is a regional security architecture that boots the US from the Persian Gulf altogether. It's a counter to Washington's long talked about yet probably unworkable idea for an "Arab NATO" whose role would be explicitly to oppose and isolate Iran, as well as narrower US ideas like a joint maritime patrol mission. The Iranian plan is unworkable too, at least absent a lot of preliminary work to build relations and confidence between Iran and the Gulf Arab states. – *Presdient.ir, UNtv*

Iranian Supreme Leader lays out diplomatic engagement with the US

Tehran (17 September): In his [speech](#), Khamenei for the first time signalled his openness to respectful diplomacy grounded in reasonable

compromise, not Iranian surrender. He contended that the current US aim with negotiations was not "just solutions," but "insulting demands." He said the US could not pursue such negotiations with the Islamic Republic, which he dubbed the "republic of honor."

Khamenei argued that if Iran negotiates with Trump while under "maximum pressure," it would forever validate the pressure track as the path to getting major concessions from Iran. He proclaimed: "If the enemy is able to prove that maximum pressure is effective on Iran, Iran and the Iranian people will never know comfort. Because behind all of America's arrogant policies will be this policy [of maximum pressure]." He added: "From then on, whatever they demand of the Islamic Republic in a bullying way... if we say no they will again start maximum pressure."

Khamenei then outlined his conditions for fresh US-Iran negotiations, saying it required a US return to the JCPOA. He stated: "When America takes back its words and repents and returns to the nuclear agreement it violated, then with the group of countries that are part of the agreement and talk with Iran, America can also participate. But without this, no negotiations at any level will occur between US and Iranian officials whether in New York or anywhere else." – *memri-org*

Yemeni government, separatists close to deal on ending Aden stand-off

Aden (07 October): The Yemeni government and Southern Transitional Council separatists are ["cut a deal"](#) that would hand control of the city of Aden off to Saudi forces while addressing STC

concerns. Fundamentally, STC will be “incorporated” into the Yemeni government and embed its militia forces within the Yemeni military in return for the restoration of at least nominal government control over the cities and regions of southern Yemen where it has assumed control in recent months. It was also reported that UAE has [withdrawn](#) some of its forces from Aden as a result of the negotiation process. – *Saudi Gazette, Yemenwatch.net*

Iran plans to start using more advanced centrifuges

Tehran (08 October): The head of Iran’s Atomic Energy Organization, Ali Akbar Salehi, says that Tehran plans to [begin using](#) a new bank of 30 advanced IR-6 centrifuges to enrich uranium soon, in addition to the 20 IR-6s it began using last month. That will dramatically improve its enrichment capacity and represents a further reduction of Iran’s commitment to the 2015 nuclear deal. – *The National.ae*

Houthis offer Saudi Arabia new deal on prisoner swap

Sanaa (11 October): The Houthis have [offered](#) the Yemeni government a new, relatively small prisoner swap involving around 2000 people as a first step toward further peace talks. This is a little more manageable than the 15,000 person swap the Houthis and the government negotiated back in December 2018, which has never been implemented because of disputes about the prisoner lists the sides have exchanged. It would be the third Houthi concession in recent weeks, following last month’s moratorium on striking targets in Saudi Arabia and unilateral prisoner release. – *The Middle East Monitor*

Iraqi snipers attacks the protestors

Baghdad (09 October): Amnesty International has issued a [statement](#) on the violent repression of recent Iraqi protests in which it takes issue with Baghdad’s claim that the snipers who have been firing at demonstrators were not sanctioned by the government. Amnesty says that witnesses reported the sniper fire coming from behind government lines and suggests that the failure of Iraqi authorities to protect protesters from the snipers or to arrest anybody in connection with the sniper shootings should be taken as evidence that the snipers were in fact part of the government’s response to the protests. It also alleges a campaign of intimidation by Iraqi security forces against journalists trying to cover the demonstrations. The Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi [announced](#) that he is forming a commission to investigate allegations of abuses against protesters during the recent stretch of demonstrations in Baghdad and across southern Iraq. – *Amnesty.org, Al Jazeera*

US extends waivers for Iraq to import electricity from Iran

Baghdad (18 October): The Trump administration has given Iraq [another 120 day waiver](#) to divest itself of Iranian electricity. And because Iraq really has few other options for electricity at this point, the administration is likely to continue to import from Iran after the deadline. The Iraqi government isn’t going to accept a national blackout to fulfill Donald Trump’s “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran, so there’s really nothing the US can do to stop Baghdad from continuing to buy

Iranian power. All it can do is keep issuing these waivers to maintain a fiction that the Iraqis are only buying Iranian electricity with Washington's permission. - *PressTv*

Secondary circuit of Iran's Arak nuclear reactor to be operational within two weeks: official

Tehran (20 October): Iranian officials say they will [activate](#) the secondary circuit on their "heavy water" nuclear reactor at Arak within the next two weeks. Before you start reading this move as another Iranian nuclear deal violation, note that this in fact appears to be part of the process of redesigning the Arak reactor in accordance with that deal. "Heavy water" reactors like Arak, which use water with a higher than normal percentage of deuterium oxide as their coolant, tend to produce more plutonium waste than "light water" (normal water) facilities. This makes them a proliferation risk, though that plutonium then has to be reprocessed for weapons use in a separate facility that Iran has not built. The 2015 nuclear deal called for Arak to be redesigned with international assistance, so that it produces considerably less plutonium waste than it would have under its original design. - *Kayhanlife.com*

Trump administration plans to deploy more US soldiers in Syria

Damascus (23 October): The United States has drawn up a plan to send troops and tanks to guard Syria's eastern oil fields amid a withdrawal from the country's north. A senior Pentagon official told [Newsweek](#) that the United States is seeking—pending White House approval—to deploy half of an Army

armored brigade combat team battalion that includes as many as 30 Abrams tanks alongside personnel to eastern Syria, where lucrative oil fields are under the control of a mostly Kurdish force involved in the U.S.-led fight against the Islamic State militant group (ISIS). The Pentagon-backed militia, called the Syrian Democratic Forces and dominated by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), will continue to be involved in securing these oil fields, the official said. The news comes as other U.S. troops exited territories elsewhere under Syrian Democratic Forces control, where NATO ally Turkey sought to neutralize YPG influence using allied Syrian insurgents. The Turkish operation was halted, however, by a U.S. deal limiting the incursion to a roughly 20-mile "safe zone"—a move President Donald Trump credited with saving "thousands" as he fulfilled his desire to remove U.S. soldiers from the war-torn country at the same time. - *Newsweek*

Turkey condemns US move to back sanctions

Ankara (30 October): The US House of Representatives passed two pieces of Turkey-related legislation. In one, it [voted 403-11](#) in favor of a resolution that "calls on" Donald Trump to impose sanctions against Turkey for its offensive in Syria. In the other, it [voted 405-11](#) to officially recognize the Ottoman Empire's 1914-1923 genocide of some 1.5 million Armenians. The Armenian Genocide is a historical fact, but for political reasons the United States has never recognized it as such. Ankara condemned both the move. - *Reuters*

Trump administration imposes additional sanctions on Iran

Tehran (25 October): The Trump administration has sounded the death knell for humanitarian trade with Iran. By designating Iran a jurisdiction of primary money laundering concern and imposing additional restrictions on foreign banks maintaining accounts for Iranian financial institutions, the United States Department of the Treasury has imposed a prohibitive bar for parties seeking to facilitate humanitarian trade with Iran—one that will further put the squeeze on the Iranian people and limit their access to food and critical medicines. In addition, by doing so, Treasury finalized a rule requiring U.S. banks to conduct “[special due diligence](#)” on accounts maintained on behalf of foreign banks if those foreign banks themselves maintain accounts for Iranian financial institutions. The practical consequence is that U.S. banks will urge their foreign correspondents to terminate any accounts maintained on behalf of Iranian banks so as to eliminate sanctions risk and mitigate the need to apply additional resources to monitor their foreign correspondents. This will further sever Iran from the global financial system, as Iran’s few non-designated banks find it increasingly difficult to maintain accounts abroad. US sanctions were already preventing needed medicines from getting to Iran and that was before the latest move. – *UStreasury.gov*

ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi confirmed death: US officials

Damascus (31 October): The US officials acknowledged the deaths of former leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and

former spokesperson Abu Hassan al-Muhajir. It named Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi as Baghdadi’s replacement, which is swell though nobody knows who he is. He could be Abdullah Qardash, the guy ISIS named as Baghdadi’s heir back in August, almost nobody in IS leadership seems to use his real name. This nom de guerre, assuming that’s what it is, tells us only that he claims to be descended from the Meccan Quraysh tribe, like Muhammad, and from the Prophet’s own Hashimite clan within that tribe. Which gives him the right family credentials to be IS’s new “caliph.”

Death toll from Yemen’s war hit 100,000 since 2015

Sanaa (31 October): A [new](#) report from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project finds that over 100,000 people have been killed during combat in the Yemeni war since it began in 2015. Tens and thousands have died of ancillary causes like diseases and starvation. There also countless civilian casualties. So far the figure includes 12,000 civilians killed not as collateral losses but in attacks that directly targeted civilians, and of those ACLED estimates that more than 8000 have been killed by the Saudi-led coalition. Some 20,000 people have been killed so far this year, making 2019 the second-deadliest year since the conflict begun. –*Farsnews.com*

Netanyahu Tells President He Can't Form Government

TEL AVIV (21 October): Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, informed the president Reuven Rivlin on 21 October 2019 that he cannot form government. Netanyahu was awarded the first shot at forming a government as

he had marginally more support from lawmakers than Gantz. Now President will offer Benny Gantz-led Blue and White a [28 days period to form a coalition](#). Currently, it seems Gantz will also not be able to form a government. If the coalition talks fails, any lawmaker backed by a majority of at least 61 [Knesset](#) members would be the next one to have a go at forming a coalition.- *Haaretz*

Series of Protests erupted in Lebanon

BEIRUT (21 October): A series of protest started in Lebanon after the government announced new taxes, including a \$6 monthly fee on calls on free messaging apps like WhatsApp. The protest are actually a response to years old economic crisis which was already existed in the society but announcement of new taxes became an sparking point for the people, releasing anger against decades of corruption, government mismanagement and nepotism. The proposed tax was scrapped just hours after the protests started, but demonstrations continued. On 21 October 2019, [Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri](#) declared a set of reforms “include halving politicians’ salaries, assistance for poor families, creating a body to fight corruption and improvements to the country’s [dilapidated electricity infrastructure](#)”. However, protests continues resulting in resignation of Prime Minister Hariri. - *Time and Al-Jazeera*

Hamas upset Qatar hosting Israel athletes

RAMALLAH (1 October): On 30 September 2019, Hamas issued a statement which says that group feels

“sorry” that Qatar was hosting Israeli sports teams and raising the Israeli flag in Doha. “We [Hamas] are sorry that Qatar is hosting an Israeli sports team and raising the Israeli flag on its soil, while the Israeli occupation is committing crimes and violations against the Palestinians and holy sites [and imposing a tight siege on Gaza](#),” Hamas said. The statement added: “Hamas considers this move a form of normalisation which the Israeli occupation uses to whitewash its image in the face of the world”. Hamas concluded: “Such actions will motivate the Israeli occupation to inflict more injustice and [oppression against the Palestinian people](#).” Qatar was hosting the World Athletics Championship this year. - *Middle East Monitor*

Jordan-Israel Peace Treaty under threat - Jordanian Parliament Speaker

16 October 2019 (Amman): The speaker of the Jordanian House of Representatives and president of the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union, [Atef Tarawneh](#), as quoted by Jordan’s government news agency by saying that the peace treaty between Jordan and Israel is “under threat” [and its mainly due to Israeli “violations” against Jerusalem](#). Tarawneh spoke at the 141st International Parliamentary Union Assembly in Belgrade on 14 October 2019.-*Jerusalem Post*

Dozens of IDF officers joined a call to support Kurds

TEL AVIV (11 October): A Group of IDF reservists have called on Israel to provide military and humanitarian support to the Kurds in Syria following Turkey’s attack. Maj. (res.) Yair Fink (Israeli reserve

army) started an online petition campaign which noted that “We, as Israelis and Jews, must not stand by when we see another nation [abandoned by its allies and left defenseless](#)”. Though the group is smaller in the size but strongly advocated to support Kurds. According to *Jerusalem Post*, “the petition, signed by dozens of reservists with the ranks ranging from captain to lieutenant colonel, was addressed to Prime Minister and Defense Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Aviv Kochavi”. The letter was sent shortly before the prime minister himself announced intentions to offer support to the Kurds.- *Jerusalem Post*

Jordanian ambassador recalled from Israel over detained citizens

AMMAN (30 October): Jordan recalled its ambassador to Israel in protest at an Israeli refusal to release two Jordanians Amman said have been illegally detained for months, the kingdom's foreign minister tweeted on 30 October 2019. Ayman Safadi said that the Israeli government is responsible for the lives of Hiba Labadi and Abdul Rahman Miri, whose "health conditions have severely deteriorated." He added that recalling the envoy was a [first step but did not elaborate](#). *The National*

Egypt, Iraq, Jordan FMs Prepare for Baghdad Tripartite Summit

CAIRO (26 October): Foreign Ministers of Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq held a trilateral meeting 25 October 2019 on the sidelines of the 18th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in Baku, capital of Azerbaijan. The three ministers discussed means of attaining the

outcome of the second summit between Egyptian President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, Jordanian King Abdullah II, and Iraqi President Barham Salih in New York in September. They also agreed that the next ministerial meeting will be held in Amman in November, in preparation for [the tripartite summit among the three countries' leaders in Baghdad](#).-*Asharq Al-Awsat*

Hearing into Corruption Charges against Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu Concluded

JERUSALEM (8 October): A four-day hearing into allegations of corruption against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu came to an end on 7 October 2019 but defense gets two more weeks for written submissions. Yossi Ashkenazy, lawyer of PM told reporters that “the hearing ended tonight... We presented all our arguments which must, logically, confirm that all the [indictments must be annulled](#)". The hearing covered three separate cases in which Netanyahu is accused of acting on behalf of wealthy supporters and [businessmen in exchange for gifts and favourable news coverage](#). Attorney general noted that he is aiming to decide by mid-December on [whether to file charges](#). – *AFP and Times of Israel*

DEFENCE AND SECURITY

Saudi oil facilities at ARAMCO under attack

RIYADH (15 September): Saudi oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais were hit by drones and it led to the escalation of existing US-Iran tension in Gulf. It also instigated the largest spike in global oil prices since the Gulf war of 1991. Yemen based Ansar Allah (Houthi) forces

claimed responsibility for the attacks. [Saudi Crown Prince MBS](#) called the incident as a terrorist attack and said that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is willing and able to confront this act of aggression. In the wake of the high impact attacks, Saudi Arabia shut down its oil pipeline that carries 0.2 million barrels per day (bpd) of Arab Light crude from Saudi Aramco to Bahrain Petroleum Company. [Saudi Arabia's energy minister](#) said that the attacks caused an interruption of an estimated 5.7 million barrels in crude supplies and threatened the world economy. -*Gulf News, Arab News*

Missiles hit Iran oil tanker off Saudi coast

Tehran (11 October): Iranian officials have [denounced](#) an apparent missile attack on one of their oil tankers off the Red Sea coast of Saudi Arabia on 11 October . Nobody has claimed responsibility for the attack. The obvious suspect would be Saudi Arabia, but Iranian officials have said that the attack didn't originate on Saudi soil. The Saudis say they received a distress call from the vessel after the incident but that it then shut off its transponder before the Saudis could send assistance. - *Navy Times*

Israeli official took part in Bahrain anti-Iran maritime security conference

MANAMA (21 October): Dana Benvenisti-Gabay, the head of the Foreign Ministry's regional security and counter-terrorism department of Israel, took part in a security conference in Bahrain on 21 October 2019 at Manama, known as the Working [Group on Maritime and Aviation Security](#). The Manama conference was a follow-up to

US-led Middle East Conference in Warsaw, which held in the February 2019 and focused on growing Iranian threat and terrorism in the region. Currently, [Bahrain and Israel](#) do not share formal diplomatic ties, but Gulf Arab countries are [progressively normalising relationships](#) with Israel against the rising insecurity from Iran. The Israeli participation has given a fresh sign of warming ties between Israel and some Arab states- *Alaraby*

Air defense systems on alert amid Iran attack fears: Israel

TEL AVIV (31 October): Israeli Air Force chief Amikam Norkin on 30 October 2019 said that all air defense systems of Israeli army were "on alert" amid of a threat of attack by Iran. In last few weeks, Israeli military began to considering that Tehran may retaliate against Israel's constant airstrikes against its forces and proxies in the region. Just few days back, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu underlined the growing possibilities of an Iranian attack to Israel from Yemen, "which may make intercepting such a strike more difficult as the IDF's intermediate and long-range air defenses are better positioned to shoot down incoming attacks from Israel's [north, rather than from the south](#)". Army said that attack could be a "large-scale attack involving cruise missiles and attack drones, similar to the strike on Saudi Arabia's Aramco petroleum facility [that was attributed to Iran](#)". -*Times of Israel*

Iraqi PM says Israel is responsible for attacks on Iraqi militias

BAGHDAD (30 September): Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi noted that Israel is behind attacks on Iranian-backed militia positions in Iraq, the first

time Baghdad has directly blamed Israel, Al Jazeera television reported on Monday. “Investigations into the targeting of some Popular Mobilisation Forces positions indicate that Israel carried it out,” Al Jazeera quoted Abdul Mahdi as telling it. The Shi’ite militias, known as the Popular Mobilisation Forces, have frequently accused Israel for raids by unmanned aircraft on their bases and weapon depots, including at least [two incidents where fighters were killed](#). *Reuters and Al-Jazeera*

ECONOMY

OPEC cut its forecast for global oil demand growth

VIENNA (11 September): OPEC cut its forecast for global oil demand growth for the rest of this year to 1.02 million barrels per day (b/d). This estimate is 80,000 b/d down from August estimate. It attributed the downgrade to weaker-than-expected economic data in the first-half of the year and deteriorating growth projections for the rest of 2019. [The report](#) came immediately before OPEC and allied non OPEC partners met in Abu Dhabi for its sixteenth meeting which reaffirmed the continued commitment of the participating producing countries in the ‘Declaration of Cooperation’ to a stable market. The cut in forecast for global oil demand growth builds a case for another round of production cuts from the group of producers. –*CNBC*

China pulls out of gas project in Iran

Tehran (06 October): The Chinese National Petroleum Corporation has [pulled out](#) of a project to develop Iran’s large South Pars gas field in the Persian Gulf. The CPNC invested in the

project last year after French oil giant Total pulled out in the face of US sanctions. It is withdrawing because of sanctions as well, saying that it could not find a way to finance its investment and transfer money to Iran under the current sanctions regime.

US raised Huawei 5G network security concerns to Gulf allies

DUBAI (12 September): US Federal Communications Commission Chair Ajit Pai visited Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain and warned them of the security risks posed by Chinese company’s 5G network. [Robert Strayer](#), the U.S. State Department’s deputy assistant secretary for cyber, international communications and information policy said, “We shared a message about the importance of securing 5G technology and applying risk based security principles.” US mentioned that Huawei could be exploited by Beijing and threatened to cut off intelligence-sharing with nations that use its equipment, however, China denied the claims repeatedly. Though Saudi Arabia and UAE did not respond to the US-Huawei tiff, Bahrain had mentioned in March that Huawei had met the Gulf state’s standards. –*Reuters*

INDIA AND THE REGION

PM Modi visits Saudi Arabia

RIYADH (29 October): At the invitation of King of Saudi Arabia, Prime Minister Modi paid a two days official visit to Riyadh. Aim of the visit is to boost bilateral ties between the two countries in key sectors, including energy and finance. During the visit, PM Modi emphasized on security threats and [stated](#), “I believe that Asian powers like

India and Saudi Arabia share similar security concerns in their neighborhood.” He had a meeting with the Saudi King as well as the Crown Prince MBS. In addition he delivered the keynote address in the Future Investment Initiative Forum. A number of MoUs were signed during the visit including Strategic Partnership Council Agreement, renewable energy, security cooperation, trafficking and smuggling, defense production, civil aviation, medical product regulation, Small and medium enterprises, foreign services institute, petroleum reserves, stock exchange and an MoU to roll out India's digital payment system (RuPay card).—*News18, MEA*

Indian expatriates in the UAE can now hold Aadhaar card

DUBAI (23 September): As per the gazette notification issued by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Indian expatriates in the UAE can now apply for Aadhaar card. UIDAI has rolled out the system for accepting applications from NRIs, as the Indian government decided to remove the mandatory criterion of 180-day stay in India. Further the notification mentioned that an NRI's valid Indian passport shall be accepted as Proof of Identity (PoI), Proof of Address (PoA), and Date of Birth (DoB) document. [An Aadhaar official](#) mentioned that NRIs can now apply online through the UIDAI website for booking an appointment at a selected Aadhaar enrolment centre. He also clarified that Aadhaar is not mandatory for NRIs and those who wish can register themselves voluntarily. The decision follows India's Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's July 2019 proposal to issue Aadhaar cards to

NRIs upon arrival in India without having to wait for the mandatory six-month stay in the country. —*Gulf News*

India differs with US definition of Iran as PM Modi meets Hassan Rouhani

New Delhi (27 September): Prime Minister Narendra Modi met Iranian President Hassan Rouhani at the sideline of UNGA on 26 September at New York as India sought to engage Tehran with an eye on energy interests and connectivity corridor via Chabahar Port amid fast changing geo-politics. Amid rising tensions in Gulf, both the leaders discussed the regional situation and energy supplies from the region. The meeting was significant amid prospects of US-Iran negotiations facilitated by France. India has also refused to get drawn into US President's remarks that Iran is the biggest sponsor of terror. Modi reiterated India's support for giving priority to diplomacy, dialogue and confidence building in the interest of maintain peace, security and stability in the Gulf region, which is vital importance for India. During the meet, it was agreed to mark the 70th Anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations in 2020. —*Economic Times*

India-Iran-Yemen FM meet at Non-Aligned Movement summit

New Delhi (23 October): External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar met his Iranian counterpart Javad Zarif on the sidelines of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Ministerial Meeting. Both the sides reviewed the entire gamut of bilateral cooperation, ongoing connectivity and infrastructure development projects including development of Shahid Beheshti Port, Chabahar and full

operationalization of the Trilateral Transit Agreement (Chabahar Agreement) between India, Iran and Afghanistan. Iran is India's gateway to Afghanistan, Central Asia, Eurasia and Russia. Jaishankar also met the minister also met his Yemeni counterpart Mohammed A Al-Hadhrami and discussed ways to enhance bilateral cooperation. –ndtv.com

India slams Turkey for unilateral offensive in Syria

New Delhi (10 October): India issued an official statement condemning Turkey's unilateral military offensive in Syria. New Delhi is "deeply concerned" due to the Turkey's action in northeastern Syria and asserted that the action can undermine stability in the region as well as the fight against terrorism. On 09 October, Turkey begun its incursion into Syria, code named Operation Peace Spring as part of its on-going rivalry with the Kurdish militias in the region – MEA.gov

(Prepared by Dr. Lakshmi Priya. Mr. Jatin Kumar and Ms. Nagapushpa Devendra)